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ACADEMY'S SECOND SEAT

– 아카데미 차석이 되었다 –

- VOLUME 1 -

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[RAEI TRANSLATIONS]

– STORY –

He became the villain in the possessed game, the rival of the main character, and the second seat.

– GENRE –

Action Fantasy Harem Romance School Life Slice of Life

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CHAPTER 1
PROLOGUE

Top Seat.

The highest position or rank.

In other words, it refers to the most outstanding individual in a group.

Below that is the Second Seat.

The second-best person in that group.

The world only remembers the first, not the second.

This doesn't mean that the second place isn't outstanding.

It doesn't mean that the second place lived a casual life.

It's because second place put in backbreaking effort and excruciating hard work that they could become second best.

* * *

It's already been a week since I transmigrated.

When I first transmigrated, I naturally thought it was a dream.

I pinched my cheeks and screamed like a madman to be sent back home, but nothing changed.

The initial emotion I felt was despair.

Being dropped into a world where I knew nothing made it hard to adapt.

However, humans have a reputation for adapting, and soon I accepted this reality.

I began investigating my new identity.

After investigating, I learned a few things.

From today on, I must attend an academy.

Liberion Academy.

The empire's largest academy, teaching magic, swordsmanship, and alchemy… that's the setting.

I seem to have transmigrated into the game 'The Academy's Top Wizard.'

Anyone who has played this game would know the name.

'Rudy Astria.'

Always second to the protagonist.

The second son of the Astria dukedom, and a guy who enters the academy as the top seat.

However, as the game's title suggests, the player-controlled protagonist takes the first seat from midterm exams onwards, leaving Rudy as the permanent Second Seat.

As the second son and second seat, 'Rudy Astria' receives various nicknames from players like 'perennial second-place' and 'the successor of the bean line,' but there's a reason behind this character's creation by the game developers.

The protagonist's antithesis.

He took on a completely opposite role.

The protagonist, a commoner, puts in effort to seize the first seat, while the high-ranking noble 'Rudy Astria' maintains the second seat with innate talent, showcasing a stark contrast between the two.

Thus, the story of the protagonist overcoming talent with effort is the main story of this game, 'The Academy's Top Wizard.'

However, this posed a problem.

I'm a veteran player of this game, so I know all the endings and the ways to achieve them.

'Rudy Astria' is an essential existence in all these endings.

He is the villain appearing from the very beginning and takes on an increasingly important role as the story progresses.

The protagonist's rival and a character doomed to be crushed by the protagonist.

That is 'Rudy Astria.'

And now, I have become 'Rudy Astria.'

* * *

Sigh…

I'm currently riding in a carriage on my way to the academy.

Since the distance between the Astria dukedom and Liberion Academy is quite long, I have been sitting in the carriage for an extended period of time.

Fortunately, the carriage floor is lined with soft cushions, so it's not uncomfortable. I just feel a little stiff from sitting for so long.

"Young Master, we are approaching the academy."

At the coachman's words, I slightly open the window and see the majestic buildings outside.

The very same scene from the opening of the game, Liberion Academy, unfolds before my eyes.

The academy, reflecting the slowly rising sun, is enough to send shivers down my spine.

The game boasted an impressive view, but seeing it in person was a whole different

experience.

Excitement makes my heart race. This is the only time I can afford to enjoy the scenery.

Once I enter the academy, I must focus solely on surviving.

There are two endings in the game where 'Rudy Astria' dies.

First, there's a story where he turns to the dark side, joining the villains.

Some might say that since 'Rudy Astria' is already a villain, this doesn't make sense.

However, it's a bit of a stretch to call him a complete villain in the initial story.

While players might label him as a 'villain' due to his condescending attitude towards the commoner protagonist, it's actually just the demeanor of a high-ranking noble.

It's difficult to call him a true 'evil' person. The story where he fully awakens as a genuine 'evil' character comes later in the game.

I must change that part somehow.

The second ending where 'Rudy Astria' dies isn't just his death; everyone in the academy dies.

It's a bad ending where the protagonist loses the final battle.

This ending is called the 'annihilation ending.' The biggest problem with this ending is that it's easier to trigger than one might think.

The game's title, 'The Academy's Top Wizard,' gives a clue.

If the protagonist fails to claim the top spot even once during any semester except the first, the bad ending occurs.

While part of the reason is that the commoner protagonist cannot afford tuition if his grades aren't good enough, there's a more important fact.

If he continuously fails to claim the top spot, he won't be able to reach the necessary specs to defeat the final boss.

However, the main problem for the protagonist to reach the endgame specs is me.

To steer this world towards the original happy ending, it's not only essential for the protagonist to maintain his top spot, but it's also crucial for me to keep my second-place position.

The rivalry between the protagonist and 'Rudy Astria' must continue so that the protagonist feels the desperate need for growth and strives to become stronger.

But there's a problem. While I am now 'Rudy Astria,' I am not the real 'Rudy Astria.' The magic genius 'Rudy Astria' doesn't exist.

That means I must study hard to maintain my second-place position.

I didn't even entertain the possibility that I might have a talent for magic and could surpass the protagonist to claim the top spot.

I must maintain the second seat… Being second place in a normal high school is not an easy feat, let alone here at Liberion Academy, the empire's elite academy.

I knew of several geniuses in the same grade, so it was doubtful whether I could maintain the second seat.

While I was pondering, the carriage entered the academy grounds. Inside the academy, there were numerous carriages and people bustling about.

Today was the entrance ceremony, so parents and acquaintances of students were present to watch. Of course, I only brought one knight with me.

It wasn't because I was frugal, but because I was an outcast in the eyes of the duke's family.

Rudy Astria, who had always felt inferior when compared to his older brother, led a miserable life in the family.

Though he was talented in magic, his abilities still paled in comparison to his brother. It wasn't that Rudy was severely lacking; it was that the eldest son of the

Astria family was exceptionally gifted.

As a result, Rudy's parents had given up on him. They saw no reason to care for a son with a poor temperament and lacking skills, so they didn't even attend the entrance ceremony.

I considered bringing a maid, but it would be a hassle to bring one just to send her back after the ceremony.

A single knight was enough to protect me.

"Young Master, we have arrived."

Upon the coachman's words, the knight opened the carriage door for me.

As I stepped out and looked around, many people were watching me.

Although I arrived quietly with only a knight, the carriage bore the white lily emblem of the Astria family, so everyone would know I was Rudy Astria.

"Ah, Young Master Rudy."

No sooner had they realized who I was, a quick-witted person approached me.

"I've heard so much about you, the new light of the Astria family."

I didn't know who they were, but they suddenly approached and started flattering me. As they began, more people approached.

"Hello, I'm the eldest son of Viscount Corwell…" "Aren't you Young Master Rudy who entered as the top student…!"

Their sweet, honey-like words flowed as they came towards me. But I knew better.

Those who speak honeyed words often harbor venom within.

Regardless, the venom wouldn't do much harm to me. Even if I were a disfavored second son, I was still part of a central noble family in the empire.

However, being friendly with them wouldn't be helpful.

They were most likely trying to leech off me. I didn't have time to expand such useless connections.

I was too busy studying and building relationships for the main storyline.

I signaled my knight, and he began to ward them off.

"Young Master seems tired from the long carriage ride. Please greet him later."

"Y-Young Master?"

The knight blocked them, leaving the noble children who had been trying to appeal to themselves flustered.

They seemed to be checking if they had made any mistakes that upset me.

Although I could have just let them leave like this, I felt there was no need to reveal my bad reputation from the start, so I added:

"I'm tired, so let's talk later when I have more time for conversation."

As I said that, the expressions of the noble children brightened again. They seemed to think it was because I was really tired, not their fault.

"Haha. You're right. We'll visit you later."

"We'll see you at the entrance ceremony."

The gathered nobles lost interest in me and began to chat with each other.

"Let's go."

With my words, the knight began to follow me, carrying my luggage.

* * *

"Hmm~?"

In a spacious dormitory room, someone was watching the scene outside the window with interest.

"Isn't this different from what I heard?"

She tilted her head as she observed the situation. Rudy Astria's act of pushing past the nobles seemed different from the image of the young master she had in mind.

"Is he really tired?"

Although she was undoubtedly looking down from a high floor, she spoke as if she had heard the conversation taking place below.

"Well, I'll find out later."

A pleased smile formed at the corners of her lips.

CHAPTER 2
ENTRANCE CEREMONY

Being the top student at Liberion Academy holds great significance.

It signifies being the most powerful individual of that age in the Empire.

The academy was well aware of this and did not skimp on investing in the top student.

They provided the largest single room in the dormitory, as well as a personal research lab.

It seems they want to show other students the clear distinction between the top student and those with lower grades.

Of course, the second-place student and those ranked lower received preferential treatment compared to those with lower grades, but not to the extent of the top student.

"Hmm…”

I entered the dormitory room provided to me.

At first, I almost exclaimed in admiration but managed not to utter a pathetic sound.

My room at the Astria Duke's residence was quite large, but this room was even bigger.

It was so big that it might feel cold when using it alone.

As I looked around the room, the knight who had carried my luggage placed it in a corner and stood idly on one side of the room.

Why was he standing like that as if he were being punished?

He would have to return to the family after the entrance ceremony anyway, so I might as well send him off earlier.

"You may return to the family now."

Upon hearing my words, the knight looked slightly surprised.

"To the family…?"

"Yes, you have nothing else to do here."

After I spoke, the knight pondered for a moment and then bowed to me.

"Knight Bellium, I shall return to the family."

"Alright, go ahead."

I gestured for the knight to leave.

After bowing to me, the knight opened the door and tried to exit.

However, he couldn't leave and just bowed his waist.

"Presenting the Empire's Star, the First Princess."

There was a blonde woman standing at the door.

A woman with fair skin and radiant golden hair.

The elegant woman gently tapped the slightly opened door with a graceful gesture.

"May I come in?"

She wore a charming smile as she knocked.

This woman was someone I knew well.

One of the main heroines of 'The Academy's Top Wizard,' the First Princess of the Empire, Rie Von Ristonia.

If I had the nickname of 'perennial second-place,' Rie was the one who always ended up third.

She entered as the second-best student but continued to rank third, pushed down by me and the protagonist.

However, she was the most influential figure at the academy.

Her mysterious smile and charisma that appeared when needed always captivated the audience.

Since she had such charisma, she always had people around her, and the princess utilized them to wield her influence.

But was there a story in which the princess came to see me?

No matter how well-versed I was in this game, I didn't know every single detail of the story.

The narrative unfolded from the protagonist's perspective, so I couldn't know everything that happened outside of his sight.

"I am honored to meet the First Princess of the Empire."

For now, I calmly greeted the princess with proper etiquette.

"You don't need to greet me so formally. We are both students here, right?"

The princess replied playfully with a smile on her lips.

Her words were indeed true.

It was stated in the academy's regulations that everyone was equal regardless of their status.

However, that didn't mean conflicts due to status differences didn't exist.

Of course, such conflicts would all be shattered when the commoner protagonist became the top student…

"I understand. But why did you suddenly visit?"

"I came to visit a fellow student I will be seeing frequently."

Although she said that, it was unlikely to be such a simple reason. The princess wasn't the type to act without thinking.

First of all, Rie despises the Astria family.

The reason Rie came to this academy was to strengthen her influence in the imperial court.

She aimed to create her own faction and use them as her loyal followers.

The academy is not only a place for learning but also a society. Attending it alone could easily create numerous allies.

For Rie, who came to create a faction, 'Rudy Astria' is an obstacle.

The Astria family, a duke family, holds the greatest power aside from the royal family.

As Rudy Astria tries to build a faction around himself, he inevitably clashes with the princess.

Those conflicts are stories for later and have no relevance now.

However, from the beginning of the game, the princess showed a dislike for 'Rudy Astria.'

She appeared normal in public, but behind the scenes, she often frowned.

From those scenes, it was clear that the princess had disliked 'Rudy Astria' even before coming to the academy.

But why would she seek out someone she dislikes?

"It's fine. Please tell me why you came to see me."

"Oh my, I really came because I wanted to get closer. Do you doubt my sincerity?"

My words could be considered rude, but Princess Rie only wore a playful smile.

Seeing her reaction after asking so directly, it appeared she came simply out of curiosity.

Although I'm familiar with her from the game, strictly speaking, this is our first encounter in reality.

"Young master, I will take my leave for now."

The knight, who had been standing at the entrance, thought it rude to continue listening to our conversation and bowed to both of us before stepping outside.

Princess Rie looked around the room as the knight left.

"By the way, did the Duke and Duchess of Astria not come?"

"They both have pressing matters and couldn't make it."

"Ah… I see."

Princess Rie put on a disappointed expression.

I had a feeling that this was an act.

The Duke of Astria was not an ordinary figure and was responsible for supporting the empire.

If the duke had taken action, there was no way the princess wouldn't have known.

"Isn't the entrance ceremony starting soon? I should change into my school uniform."

It was a hint for her to leave.

There was no benefit to continuing the conversation with her.

Thankfully, this person, who probably hates me the most in the academy, has yet to discover any of my weaknesses.

"Yes, we should head to the entrance ceremony soon."

The princess grinned and opened the door.

"See you later."

I watched the princess leave the room.

See you later?

Absolutely not.

Although I don't want to get involved, it's bound to happen as time goes on, but there's no need to start now.

Besides, it wouldn't be easy to meet the princess among hundreds of new students.

* * *

Cherry blossoms fluttered, filling the air with their fragrance.

The warm sunlight and scattering petals made it clear that spring had arrived.

The stiff school uniform I wore brought back memories of my high school entrance ceremony, a time filled with anticipation for new, albeit awkward, encounters.

However, the situation now was drastically different.

If I didn't pull myself together here, I could die.

Back then, studying was optional, but here it was mandatory.

If I tried to enjoy my youth without studying properly, I would end up with the annihilation ending.

I had to study as if my life depended on it.

As that pressure began to build, my excitement faded away.

I walked through the crowd towards the entrance ceremony venue.

Parents and other people were present, making the area quite lively.

As I approached the venue, I saw students who appeared to be checking identification and guiding new students.

They were also preventing non-students from entering.

It seemed like having parents and other people in the student area would make it too crowded.

I presented my identification to enter the ceremony.

"Here it is."

A black-haired female student wearing a uniform took my identification.

"Rudy… Astria?"

She looked back and forth between my ID card and me.

"Ah… You're the top of this year's class. You can sit over there."

"Over… there?"

Upon my inquiry, the student smiled and pointed to the front.

There were two seats next to the VIP area.

One of them was occupied by the First Princess I had met earlier, Rie von Ristonia.

The seats were reserved for the top and second place students.

It seemed that the princess's words about meeting later referred to these seats.

I had no choice but to sit next to the princess.

"We meet again."

The princess greeted me warmly.

I slightly bowed my head and sat down.

As soon as I did, the princess started a conversation.

"There seem to be many outstanding people among this year's new students. Locke Lucarion, the son of the Northern Marquis, or Serina Rinsburg, the daughter of the Royal Head Elementalist…"

I recognized the people the princess mentioned.

They weren't main characters but were frequently mentioned supporting characters.

I silently listened to her stories beyond that.

I didn't dislike talking with others.

However, the fact that my counterpart was a princess made this seat feel like a bed of nails.

She appeared light-hearted, but inside, she was probably sharpening her blade.

"Although there are famous people like them…"

The princess pointed at me.

"Actually, if we talk about fame, it would be you or me, who are the most famous."

With a sly smile, Rie's appearance was alluring enough to captivate any man.

It made me realize the importance of one's appearance.

Seeing the princess's stunning beauty and smile, my heart was drawn to her.

Still, I couldn't let my guard down.

After all, Rie von Ristonia was known for stabbing people in the back with that same smile.

As I listened to the princess's stories, it seemed the preparations for the entrance ceremony were complete.

"Ah, we will now begin the Liberion Academy entrance ceremony."

With the emcee's words, the ceremony started.

* * *

“……That concludes the headmaster's welcoming speech for the new students."

The entrance ceremony was no different from an ordinary high school's.

We just had to endure dull speeches from the guests of honor.

At least now that the headmaster's speech was over, the ceremony seemed to be drawing to a close.

"Next, we will have the freshman representative deliver a word of thanks."

Freshman representative?

I hadn't heard anything about who was selected for this role.

Typically, the student with the best grades is chosen, right?   "Rudy Astria, please come forward."

That's right. I was the freshman representative.

I hadn't received the news due to being preoccupied with my recent transmigration.

Or perhaps I received it before my transmigration……

Regardless, I needed to deal with the current situation first.

I calmly moved to the podium without showing any panic.

As I ascended the platform, hundreds of people stared at me.

I hadn't had many opportunities to speak in front of a large crowd, let alone without a script.

I couldn't make a mistake.   I am 'Rudy Astria,' a noble and arrogant individual.

If someone like me were to make a mistake here, my image would be shattered.

I took a deep breath and began to speak.

"I would like to express my gratitude to the headmaster and the honorable guests for their kind words."

The best way to avoid making mistakes here was to avoid being verbose.

It was better to be concise and clear, but I shouldn't come across as overly arrogant.

My image was already bad enough, and starting off like that would only bring me closer to a bad ending.

"I hope that everyone will study hard and enjoy their youth while at the academy."

It was a cliché statement that anyone could make.

After saying that, I stood silently as people stared at me with puzzled expressions.

There was nothing but a sudden, deafening silence.

The emcee was the one to break it.

“……Is that all?"

I responded confidently to the emcee's question, with the arrogance and assertiveness characteristic of 'Rudy Astria.'

"Yes, that's all."   "……. Ahem, that was Rudy Astria, our freshman representative."

The emcee seemed slightly flustered, but he continued to lead the ceremony skillfully.

I stepped down from the podium along with the emcee's guidance. As I descended, I made eye contact with Princess Rie, and her gaze seemed to have changed.

The curious look in her eyes had transformed into a sharp, predatory one, as if she was hunting prey.

Unlike earlier, she didn't utter a single word.

CHAPTER 3
FIRST CLASS(1)

"Your Highness, how have you been? You look exceptionally beautiful today."

Sweet words.

"Your Highness, to be able to control magic to this extent already… You truly are the Empire's treasure!"

Honey-coated tongue.

"Your Highness, I heard you've become the Academy's second seat. As expected, you've achieved such a high rank so quickly. Soon, you'll be able to claim the top spot."

However, they were the ones I despise more than anyone.

Their kind existed within the imperial palace.

They always wore a smiling face, spouting sweet words like candy, but behind their backs, they hid blades.

They were always ready to stab me if I ever fell.

That's why I couldn't afford to make mistakes.

I always had to plan ahead and prepare for everything.

And, wearing a smile as my mask, I too had to sharpen my blade.

That way, I could parry my opponents' attacks if I ever stumbled.

“…I should change into my school uniform."

'Huh?'

At first, it was just suspicion.

“…enjoy their youth."

‘…'

'Rudy Astria.'

He had been on my radar even before I enrolled in the Academy.

The second son of the Astria dukedom, a family responsible for one of the Empire's pillars.

Yet, from what I had heard, he wasn't someone I needed to worry about.

He was rumored to be a discarded child of the Astria family.

After hearing what my spy in the Astria family reported, I knew the rumor to be true.

He was immature, arrogant, and authoritarian.

As expected from the Astria family, his magical talent was outstanding, but even that paled in comparison to his elder brother.

In short, he was a bundle of inferiority.

Someone consumed by inferiority was the best prey in social circles.

The most important thing in social circles was to filter out the praise and understand the intentions behind it.

Those filled with inferiority craved praise, making them easy prey in social circles.

But who was this person standing before me?

A smile crept onto my lips.

It had been a while.

It was truly a long time since I had seen my plan go awry like this.

This person was not a bundle of inferiority.

Instead, he seemed like a bland person with no interest in his surroundings.

He had pushed away everyone who approached him.

I could understand driving away the insects trying to pick up his falling crumbs, but he even pushed away me, the princess.

He neither flattered nor challenged me, just pushed me away.

When I met him directly, he was very formal, and when I tried to engage in conversation from the seat beside him, he ignored me.

And then there was his speech, a perfect opportunity to show himself off.

He had let it end so anticlimactically.

What was this person doing? Had he been wearing a mask within his family all this time?

The 'Rudy Astria' I had heard of and the 'Rudy Astria' I was seeing now were completely different people.

His arrogance and noble attitude fit to some extent, but it was far from the label of an inferiority complex or the abandoned child of the Astria family.

I even suspected that my spy within the Astria family was a traitor.

However, there was no way a spy would betray me so easily.

If they betrayed me, they wouldn't be able to guarantee their life or even their family's safety.

If I were to think of another reason why Rudy Austria changed…

"Did he remove his mask?"

Perhaps he had been wearing the mask of a naive second son from the prestigious duke's family, and had removed it upon arriving here.

Then, there were many things to consider.

Why did he act and why did he remove the mask?

"How interesting…”

I found a huge variable in the academy, where I thought there were only immature children.

Yet, I can't help but smile.

The current situation was just a game for me.

Though free for now, they were but a toy that would soon be in my grasp.

There was no way these immature children could compete with me, who had survived in the palace full of snakes.

I thought so and walked to my dormitory.

* * *

"Why do you look so displeased?"

Princess Rie glanced at me with interest, but ultimately only greeted me and left.

Although her intrigued gaze was undoubtedly charming, it felt as if she could see right through me, making me uncomfortable.

Despite the situation diverging from the game's story, it wasn't a significant issue.

In any case, this part of the story could be changed.

Altering the image of 'Rudy Astria,' who seems unlikable, is an essential action to avoid death.

One of the causes of Rudy Astria's demise in the game was that everyone at the academy turned against him.

I was also satisfied with the speech I gave on the stage.

One of the things I hated most as a student was listening to the tedious sermons from the principal and teachers.

Simple phrases like "take care of your health" and "study hard" were stretched out to the point of irritation.

A short, blunt speech like mine would have been preferable.

I imagine the other students felt the same.

If I were a student in the audience, I would have applauded such a brief speech.

"Anyway, that's not the problem."

No matter how much attention I paid to that part, there was nothing I could do about it now.

What I needed to focus on was my growth.

'Status Window'

「Name: Rudy Astria Age: 17 Abilities: Beginner Magic: LV 6 Fire Attribute Magic: LV 5 Wind Attribute Magic: LV 3 Swordsmanship: LV 2 Elemental Magic: LV 2」

The game's status window appeared before my eyes.

It was the first thing I tried after realizing I had transmigrated.

The status window worked correctly, allowing me to learn about myself.

Seeing Rudy Astria's name on the status window made me hold my breath, but the fact that his beginner magic was already at level 6 brought relief.

The protagonist begins the game with level 1 beginner magic.

However, this guy had already reached level 6 in magic even before entering the academy.

He seemed to have cheat-like abilities from the start.

I wondered how the protagonist had ever defeated such a character.

Of course, it was good fortune for me…

However, even with these overpowered abilities, I still couldn't secure the top seat.

The academy offered practical classes teaching magic, but there were also theoretical classes.

No matter how talented one was, it was meaningless without good grades in theory.

I rummaged through the luggage that the knight had left behind and pulled out some books.

'Basic Magic Theory.'

'Elemental Studies.'

'Imperial History.'

And several other books were present.

"Ah…"

Seeing the thick books, I already felt a headache coming on.

But only studying could save me.

After all, I already knew what would happen at the academy, so I just needed to study well.

I tore a page from a notebook and wrote with a pen.

-Studying is a matter of life and death.

It was my determination.

It wasn't a typical student's resolution because failing to study could genuinely lead to my death.

I simply wrote down the facts.

I mustn't allow myself to become lazy.

I opened the Basic Magic Theory book.

From the very day of the entrance ceremony, I began studying.

* * *

The next day, I headed to class with my book in hand.

The classes at Liberion Academy were similar to those in a university.

There were no morning meetings like in high school, and students would apply for and attend the classes they wanted.

However, in the first year, the academy would arrange the class schedule for students.

The schedule was based on the students' entrance exam performance. For example, in magic practice, if students with differing abilities were to learn together, it would be too difficult to progress.

So, students were divided into classes based on their abilities.

Exams were the same for everyone, so there was no consideration in terms of evaluation.

According to the schedule arranged by the academy, my first class was Basic Magic Theory.

Although this subject also had different class divisions, it wasn't based on skill but rather due to the large number of students.

On my way to class, I saw someone who caught my eye.

Unlike the colorful hair of other characters, this person had familiar black hair.

It was Evan, the protagonist of the game.

He overcame various trials and became the top student of the academy through sheer effort alone.

He was the character I used to empathize with, and it was nice to see him.

But I couldn't get too close to him.

He had to think of me as his enemy so he would strive to surpass me.

With that in mind, many characters would attend this first class together. Evan entered the classroom first, and I followed him in.

"Let's begin the class," said the professor standing in front.

"I am Professor George Mcguire, and I'm in charge of Basic Magic Theory. Since today is the first day, let's start with self-introductions."

Self-introduction time.

I really disliked it.

It was an event that originally occurred in the game to introduce the characters.

However, in reality, it was an extremely embarrassing situation.

There wouldn't be anyone who had prepared a proper self-introduction like in games or novels.

"Let's start with Rudy, who ranked first in the entrance exam, and go in order," said the professor.

I had seen this situation many times before. I had to watch this scene every day to see all the endings in the game.

There was no way to skip the starting event, after all.

And there was an important point in this event.

This was the moment when Evan first viewed me unfavorably.

I sighed inwardly.

To make Evan see me unfavorably, I had to repeat the exact words 'Rudy Astria' said in the game.

It was important to proceed with the story related to Evan as it originally happened, at least for now.

In the beginning, I needed to gain Evan's dislike.

Of course, I would have to fix this unfavorable relationship later on, but it was right to act according to the story now.

Evan's initial motivation was his dislike of 'Rudy Astria.'

Feeling this animosity towards 'Rudy Astria,' Evan would strive to surpass him.

The more effort Evan put in, the faster his growth would be, allowing me to smoothly progress through the early parts of the story.

However… it was so embarrassing.

I had to utter lines that I would only say in a game.

Moreover, I had to spit out the lines of a villain or someone distasteful.

It would be better to utter the protagonist's cool lines.

Though those lines would still be cringe-worthy, at least they would be cool.

Despite grinding my teeth, I had to do it to survive.

Yes. I had to bear this level of embarrassment.

To survive.

I stood up from my seat and assumed an arrogant posture.

"I am Rudy Astria of the Astria ducal family. You filthy, insignificant beings. Be grateful just for breathing the same air in this space."

A line that sounded like a teenager going through a phase.

It felt like I should summon a black dragon from my right hand.

Although I wanted to tear my hair out in self-loathing, I didn't drop the arrogant attitude.

Looking around, I saw people frowning and glaring at me.

I made enemies out of my classmates from the very first lesson.

I needed to change this image, but there was nothing I could do at the beginning.

Especially in front of Evan…

"Ah… yes. Next student."

The professor proceeded nervously after hearing my words.

After that, I could sit down again.

If I had stood for a few seconds longer, I might have died from embarrassment…

Though my actions were to survive, they might end up killing me.

"Ah, yes! I am Luna Railer of the Railer Baron family! I know I'm lacking, but please take care of me!"

As I was panicking alone after what I said, my senses returned upon hearing the name 'Luna Railer.'

'Luna Railer.'

She was also one of the main heroines in the game, like Princess Rie.

A main heroine, but the most difficult character to win over.

And the person I needed for the plan I had set up.

CHAPTER 4
FIRST CLASS(2)

Lunchtime arrived as class ended.

Numerous students flocked to the cafeteria for a meal.

However, among them, no one chose to eat with me.

In fact, nobody even attempted to approach me.

Before heading to eat, a few guys did approach me.

After class ended, three guys with colorful hair came up to me.

Curiously, they had red, orange, and green hair.

They appeared to be ruffians with slanted eyes and a troublemaker-like demeanor.

They didn't look like supporting characters but rather minor delinquents A, B, and C.

"Young Master Rudy, your self-introduction was truly magnificent."

"You exuded the dignity of a true high noble!"

"Indeed!"

The three of them came up to me and flattered. I looked at them with a smile and said,

"Get lost."

"What?"

"I said, get lost."

The ones I needed to avoid the most were not the main or supporting characters but these ruffians.

They ranked first on my list of people to avoid.

To some extent, I had to put up with criticizing and demeaning others like I did in class.

If I wanted to follow the plot, it was an inevitable action.

Compared to the villains that would appear later, this level of unpopularity was cute and could be washed away easily.

However, I absolutely couldn't be friends with these guys.

They might flatter me in front of me, but they were uncontrollable.

They were troublemakers who caused mischief and acted like ruffians when I wasn't around.

If they happened to harass the heroines or cause a major incident, it would be irreversible.

If I hung out with them, people would blame me more than these guys.

Even if I claimed, "I didn't do anything," nobody would listen.

If I was with these guys, anyone would think I was the leader.

Even I thought the same.

Let's say there were ruffians and a successful guy among them.

If the ruffians caused trouble and the successful guy wasn't present, what would people think?

They would probably assume the successful guy ordered the ruffians to carry out the deed.

So it was crucial not to get involved with them from the start.

Sigh…

I picked up a spoon and reluctantly shoved the rice into my mouth.

Eating alone was indeed a lonely experience, even if it was for survival.

In this world, the culture of dining alone wasn't as prevalent as in modern times.

Most people gathered together to eat their meals.

Yet, here I was, eating by myself in the cafeteria.

First-year students with red scarves around their necks glanced at me while murmuring.

It seemed that word of my actions in class had spread.

As a result, I felt even more miserable.

How could there not be a single friend among these numerous students to share a meal with me?

I wondered if I should try to find an extra character to dine with.

After hastily finishing my meal, I went outside and saw a woman drinking water in the distance.

She was a girl with plain brown hair, tied into two braids.

Compared to the vibrant hair colors of other Academy students, her hair color was unremarkable, but her pure appearance drew attention.

Her name was Luna Railer.

Luna was the daughter of a poor baron family.

Born as the only daughter in her family, she discovered her talent for magic when a wizard passed through her territory.

However, compared to the talents of other Academy students, her abilities appeared

quite ordinary.

Her talent lay in magic theory, which would shine as she continued her studies.

Yet, in the beginning, her talent was not apparent.

Because of her low entrance exam scores, she enrolled in the Academy without receiving any support.

Coming from an impoverished family and not receiving any financial aid from the Academy, paying tuition was a heavy burden for her.

The act of drinking water was likely to fill her stomach, as she didn't have the money to buy food.

As someone with an abundance of money, I wanted to take her and feed her.

I felt pity for her, knowing her circumstances and watching her hold her starving stomach.

However, I couldn't do that.

Not until 'that incident' occurred.

The reason Luna Railer was the most challenging character to conquer was nothing special.

It was merely the fact that the related events happened too early in the story.

To conquer Luna, I had to pay more attention to her than to my studies from the very beginning.

I had to hover around her, gain her trust, and assess the situation.

If I devoted that much time to her, it would become too difficult to rank first in the midterm exams.

Of course, the early story related to Luna could be ignored.

Even without the protagonist's involvement, she could overcome the situation on her

own.

Luna's main story would appear in the middle of the game.

In that story, I could build affection points and conquer Luna.

However, to properly conquer her, I couldn't ignore this part of the story.

It was a hidden story that occurred in the background but wasn't necessary to get involved in.

I planned to use that hidden story to my advantage.

Luna frowned and sighed, seemingly still hungry after drinking water.

"…"

Pitiful.

I turned around and headed for the school store.

* * *

"I'm so hungry…"

Luna was filled with regret.

She wondered if she had made a mistake enrolling here.

Her family was poor, but she had never experienced going hungry like this before.

"Still, I have to stay strong! Since I'm already enrolled…!"

She came to this place to revive her family's fortune.

It had been a long time since a truly talented person emerged from her family.

The Railer family could only trace their lineage back to Luna's great-great-grandfather, where their records were limited to a single line.

Now, their family was on the brink of collapse due to financial difficulties.

The family's territory was no more than a small rural village, so they couldn't squeeze money out of their subjects.

Of course, if they were as ruthless as wringing a dry squid for soup, they could have somehow extracted money from their subjects, but the Railer family head was not malicious.

While worrying about the future of her family, Luna encountered a wizard passing through their territory.

The wizard told Luna she had a talent for magic and gifted her a magic tome.

The tome contained difficult content, which was beyond Luna's beginner level in magic.

However, since it was a gift for her, she cherished it as a treasure. She hoped that someday, she would be able to use the tome…

"But before that, I might die from hunger…"

Luna clutched her hungry stomach.

She had some money from her family, but she had to save it.

You never know when you'll need money…

So, Luna decided to have only dinner today.

"At least it's good for dieting! Hehe!"

Luna tried to think positively, but it didn't ease her hunger.

"Excuse me…?"

As Luna turned around, she saw two female students standing behind her.

"Who… are you?"

The scarves of the two girls were green, indicating they were second-year students.

"A first-year student asked us to give this to you."

The senior handed Luna a bag containing bread.

It was a basic bread sold at the store.

Though wealthy commoners might snub such ordinary bread, for hungry Luna, it was like a lifeline.

Luna looked back and forth between the bread and the seniors with wide eyes.

"Who gave this…?"

Luna suddenly started to feel anxious.

Her friends had gone to have lunch, and she had slipped away, saying she had something else to do.

Could it be that one of her friends saw her like this and gave her the bread?

But that didn't make sense.

In that case, her friend would have given it to her, not asked unknown second-year seniors to do so.

"Did they say who asked you to give it to me?"

"Uh, it was a student over there… Huh? Where did they go?"

As Luna asked, the senior pointed to the back, but there was no one there.

"Um, what did they look like?"

She had to find out who it was.

There was no benefit to rumors spreading that she had no money.

"It was a boy… Blonde with slightly slanted eyes? Something like that."

"A… a boy?"

Luna had made a few female friends at the academy, but she had never even greeted a boy.

She had grown up in a rural territory and had no immunity to boys.

Her father was overprotective, and there were few kids in the countryside.

Thus, she had never even thought about talking to a boy.

Which meant that the person who gave her the bread was not someone she knew.

"We'll be going now."

"Ah, thank you!"

Luna came to her senses and bid farewell to the departing seniors.

Then she looked at the bread in her hand.

Bread given by a stranger.

"Who could it be?"

Luna took the bread out of the bag and put it in her mouth.

"It's delicious."

And with the bread in her cheek, she smiled a happy smile.

* * *

In my dorm room, today was an incredibly exhausting day.

I stayed up late studying for tomorrow's classes and woke up early to attend them.

Despite this, I still had enough energy physically.

However, the fact that I had spoken so many cringe-worthy lines in front of many

people kept haunting my thoughts, mentally exhausting me even during other classes.

"I can't avoid studying."

Being tired is one thing, but I can't put off studying. I glanced at the timetable the academy had provided.

Tomorrow's classes include Imperial History and Magic Practice.

While history is a general education course, I should prepare for the magic practice beforehand.

My magic abilities are exceptional, but I've never used magic properly.

Just as having good tools is useless if you don't know how to use them, I need to practice handling magic in advance.

I opened a magic theory book and looked at the basic spells, which were almost identical to the game.

In 'The Academy's Top Wizard,' magic was divided into three levels.

Beginner, intermediate, and advanced magic.

It could be simply divided into these three categories.

If further subdivided, magic could be divided by attributes. Beginner magic had four attributes: fire, water, wind, and earth.

These were the basic elemental spells. With intermediate magic, one could learn specialized spells like space magic and more detailed attributes like ice and wood.

However, advanced magic was slightly different.

Instead of learning new specialized attributes, the size of the magic significantly increased.

There were spells that could control nature itself, like summoning a typhoon or making it rain, and spells that could engulf an entire battlefield in flames.

Advanced magic was nothing short of a catastrophe.

A catastrophe that could destroy an entire village without a trace.

"For now, let's start with the basics…”

I looked at the basic spells I could use.

Magic that could be used without drawing a magic circle, utilizing the mana within my body.

There were also methods using magic circles, but I couldn't use them yet due to my lack of knowledge about magic.

"Let's start with this."

A spell caught my eye as I skimmed the book.

"Ignite."

As I said the word, a small flame appeared in my hand.

It was the most basic fire attribute spell.

Since my fire attribute magic proficiency was the highest, I could use it quite easily.

"Wow…”

I stared at the small flame in my hand.

Not only was the sight of the flame in my hand amazing, but the feeling of creating it was fascinating too.

It felt like something inside my body was flowing towards my hand to create the flame, similar to the sensation of drinking water.

As soon as I thought about stopping the magic, the flow I felt in my hand ceased, and the flame went out.

I practiced using the fire and wind attribute magic I could handle, getting a feel for

using magic.

After gaining some sense of it, I lay down on the bed with a satisfied smile.

However, I would come to regret it the next day.

Why did I sleep?

I should have remembered that the Magic Practice professor was a real eccentric.

I should have stayed up all night studying.

CHAPTER 5
FIRST CLASS(3)

Magic Practice classroom.

As I entered, there was only one student inside.

"Hello."

The person was none other than Princess Rie, whom I had met before.

It was a class attended by just the two of us.

One might think it was the inefficient, but there was a reason for this.

Magic Practice had a significant gap in skill level between students with low and high grades.

What the low-grade students learned was an extension of the theory class.

This was because some of them didn't know how to use magic at all.

On the other hand, students with excellent magic skills could already use magic to some extent.

Therefore, there was no need to provide additional theory classes for high-grade students.

It was a more efficient teaching method to finish theory classes during theory class time and learn different spells during practice class time.

"Princess Rie, greetings."

I greeted Princess Rie with a polite demeanor.

"Hey, you don't have to be so formal. We're the same age, after all."

"No, I must."

"Hmm… Don't you want to be friends, Rudy Astria?"

Rie smiled at me as she spoke. However, I had no interest in getting close to her.

At present, I am the most outstanding individual in the academy.

The academy's brightest star.

However, to a princess who wants to become the sun, I am nothing but an obstacle.

A star brighter than the sun itself would only make her own light seem dim, providing no assistance.

What could be the reason for trying to befriend such an unhelpful person?

If delinquents were priority one to avoid, then Princess Rie would be priority zero.

She could bury me without anyone noticing.

The classroom door opened with a creak, and a professor entered.

He had messy hair and a rough, bearded appearance.

The professor placed the book he was holding onto his desk with an indifferent expression.

"Only two students this year, huh?"

The professor glanced back and forth between Rie and me.

His gaze was dry and emotionless, not one you'd expect when looking at the son of a duke and the empire's princess.

In a relationship between professors and students, the professor is the superior, regardless of status.

However, society isn't that simple.

If a student's status was high, the professor could be beneath them or even on equal footing.

But the way this professor looked at us seemed as if he was merely observing insignificant students.

"Call me Professor Cromwell."

Cromwell briefly introduced himself, only revealing his last name.

It was quite a rude greeting, but Rie and I could only stare at him.

"So, shall we see your skills?"

As Cromwell waved his hand, desks and chairs flew to both sides.

"Fight each other."

"What?"

Rie furrowed her brows at Cromwell's words.

"I said fight."

It was absurd.

There's no professor who would make students fight each other like this.

Normally, students were forbidden from fighting outside of formal duels or practical evaluations.

Rie and I had no intention of fighting.

Even if he was a professor, he couldn't force us to fight if we didn't want to.

A professor may rank higher than a student, but they are not above the established rules.

This was a classroom, not some back alley of the academy, so this act of violence could not be justified.

"Are you saying you'll ignore the school regulations?"

Rie said exactly what was on my mind.

I couldn't fight Rie.

Having only used magic briefly yesterday, I wouldn't stand a chance against the princess.

My true abilities would be exposed.

Even if using magic directly in a fight differs from its normal usage, both the princess and the professor would surely find it strange once they see the scope of my magic.

"Then are you saying you'll ignore the professor's words?"

Cromwell raised an eyebrow at Princess Rie's question.

"It means that, depending on the situation."

I absolutely could not fight.

If I fought the princess, I wouldn't be able to defend against her magic properly and would end up rolling around pitifully.

The rumor would spread throughout the academy.

There was no reason for the princess not to spread such a rumor.

The story of the top student who arrogantly disregarded everyone, getting trampled by the second seat, would be too sensational.

I made up my mind and opened my mouth.

"How trivial."

The gazes of both the professor and Rie focused on me.

"Do you mean to say that you must see us fight to evaluate us?"

I brought up a valid point.

"Professor Cromwell, perhaps you should be teaching mercenaries instead of students at Liberion Academy?"

This class wasn't about teaching us how to fight.

It was a magic practice class, teaching us how to use magic efficiently and exploring various applications of different types of magic.

That's what a magic practice class was about.

Magic wasn't created solely for fighting.

Fighting was just one of the many ways it could be used.

So, ordering us to fight each other in this class was refusable.

"This class doesn't seem worth attending."

I snorted arrogantly and headed toward the back door of the classroom.

"Are you saying you'll disobey my command?"

Cromwell spoke to me with a threatening tone.

"If you leave like this, there could be consequences."

However, if I were to back down pathetically here, I would just fall to the level of a third-rate thug.

I can't let that happen.

Even though I'm talking big, this is essentially running away.

Fleeing without a thought is disgraceful, but strategically retreating takes courage and wisdom.

I opened my mouth, looking at Professor Cromwell.

"Disobedience, you say?"

I opened the back door.

"Am I a dog that obeys?"

Hearing my words, Cromwell lowered his head.

"Hehehe…"

As I tried to leave, Cromwell suddenly burst into laughter.

"Hahahaha…"

He laughed out loud.

Princess Rie stared at Cromwell with round eyes.

"I apologize. You're right. You're not dogs. Come back to the classroom."

Seeing this, I furrowed my brow.

What's he trying to do?

"Don't worry, it was just a test. Come in."

A test…?

I realized the eccentric professor's intentions.

"My intention was slightly different, but you both chose not to fight, so I think that's the right answer."

Cromwell continued with a smile.

"You two are the strongest students among the first-years at the academy. Being the strongest students means you're the strongest among your peers in the Empire. Such powerful individuals should not recklessly use their strength. You always need to think about whether you're on the right path."

Princess Rie looked at me with a surprised expression.

No, I didn't think about that when I decided not to fight…

"You shouldn't use your power recklessly. If you wanted, you could kill people as easily as crushing ants beneath your feet."

Cromwell looked at me with a sinister expression, giving me a smile.

"The meaning of using one's strength was what I intended to teach in the first lesson. Even under pressure, if you think you're wrong, you shouldn't use your power. That's the basic mindset of a wizard. However…"

Cromwell gestured, and two of the desks that were put away earlier flew to the center of the classroom.

"It seems there's nothing to teach you about mindset."

"…"

Did I achieve a good outcome?

"Well, that's enough about mindset. Let's see your true abilities."

Then, Professor Cromwell handed us each a piece of paper.

"This class is a practical one, but you need a basic understanding of theory to use magic effectively. So, let's have a short test to see how much you know about theory."

Ah.

I'm screwed.

I should have just fought Rie.

I have almost no knowledge of magic in my head right now.

I'd rather fight a messy fight…

With a gloomy heart, I received the test paper.

"This test won't count towards your evaluation, so don't feel pressured."

Hearing those words, I felt somewhat relieved.

After all, only Professor Cromwell will know the score…

So it shouldn't be a problem, right?

* * *

Professor Cromwell's office.

"How interesting."

Cromwell was reading about the students after class had ended.

Rudy of the Astria duchy and Rie, the First Princess of the Empire.

There had been a few students like Rie so far.

However, it was hard to say that those students had any strong convictions. They could simply be model students who followed the school rules.

What Professor Cromwell wanted in a student was not someone like them.

He wanted someone who could refuse to comply even if the Empire's laws forced them.

Someone with their own beliefs.

In that sense, Rudy Astria was intriguing.

Arrogant and haughty.

However, that didn't matter.

Originally, talented wizards were arrogant and haughty.

No, those wizards were not arrogant.

How could they help it if the people around them were genuinely inferior and not on the same level?

It's only unfair for the lion when the ant claims it's showing off while acting as a lion should.

"…?"

When Cromwell tried to grade Rudy Astria's exam, it was completely blank.

It was not a test that affected his grades, but he hadn't written a single word.

Was the test too easy? Or was he still angry about being tested?

Cromwell simply moved on from that exam.

After all, he was the top student of the academy, so he must already know the content.

The reason for evaluating theory in practical classes like this was due to students who were bad at theory but good at using magic.

Those who simply used magic by intuition.

Such students have high practical scores but low overall grades.

The test was originally prepared for those students.

But, after all, weren't those two the first and second seats? There was no need to worry about them.

Knock knock

"Come in."

A woman holding several documents entered as Cromwell spoke.

"Professor, I came to receive a recommendation letter."

A woman with neatly tied-up red hair. She was very neatly dressed.

"You're already here for it?"

Although his words sounded slightly cold, his face was smiling.

"Isn't it better to get it done quickly?"

The woman also smiled, familiar with his tone, and handed over the documents.

What was written on them was a recommendation letter for the student council president.

"Wouldn't it be difficult to maintain the top seat while holding the president's position?"

"I just need to reduce my sleep."

She said nonchalantly.

Cromwell chuckled and signed the document, handing it back to her.

"Thank you."

She smiled brightly and accepted the document.

"Are you not having a hard time with this year's first-year students?"

"Are you worried about me?"

She playfully shrugged her shoulders.

"There's an interesting guy."

"An interesting guy?"

She asked with a slightly puzzled face.

"Rudy Astria."

Her face showed surprise, but it soon broke into a smile.

CHAPTER 6
LUNA RAILER (1)

After the incident in the magic practice class, I was worried.

I wondered if submitting a blank test paper would cause any problems.

However, Professor Cromwell didn't say anything.

He briefly came to me and said, "Submit a proper one next time," before leaving.

I continued my life at the academy as usual.

I diligently attended classes during the day and reviewed lessons at night.

It was the life of an ordinary student.

The only slight difference was…

"50 coppers, please."

I would wake up early in the morning, go to the store, and buy some bread.

I placed the bread in Luna's locker.

This action didn't carry any special meaning.

I just knew how sad it was not to be able to eat when you're hungry.

When I was young, I once went to a church retreat.

I didn't go there because of any particular faith; I just wanted to have fun.

But the church made the students who came there practice fasting and prayer.

So there I was, unable to eat properly and praying every day at a place I went to have

fun.

The sense of helplessness and shock I felt back then was beyond my imagination.

Luna came here to study, not to practice fasting and studying.

It didn't seem like a big problem since I wasn't doing anything wrong, just giving her perfectly good bread.

"Is it starting soon…?"

Luna's hidden story would begin soon.

If I were Evan, I would have had to gain Luna's affection earlier.

But Evan and I were different.

Initially, Rudy Astria had an advantage over Evan.

Compared to Evan, Rudy Astria lacked nothing in terms of money, ability, or status.

Even my grades were better than his at this point.

So, there was no need to do any groundwork as I would have to do if I were following Evan's story.

Luna's hidden story.

It starts when Luna receives high praise from a professor during her magic theory class presentation.

A theory that ordinary students couldn't think of.

Upon witnessing this, Professor Mcguire calls for Luna.

Knowing Luna's situation to some extent, Professor Mcguire offers to sponsor her.

The condition is to bring a similar achievement before the midterm exams.

He promises to cover all her tuition fees for three years if she can prove herself.

Luna started researching magic in the library from that point on.

As the deadline approached, Luna's anxiety grew.

In her desperation, Luna eventually took out her precious grimoire.

The grimoire contained a wealth of information, but among the content, there was also dark magic.

Luna unwittingly chose one of the spells in the grimoire to cast, which happened to be dark magic.

Unaware that it was dark magic, Luna cast the spell.

Dark magic possessed immense destructive power but caused mental corruption when the casting failed.

As Luna's mind became corrupted, her mana went out of control and destroyed the library, leading to her punishment.

If Evan were to intervene in this story, he would stop Luna from going berserk.

Since Luna didn't possess such great power, Evan could easily stop her.

With Evan's intervention, the incident would be resolved without much damage to the library, and Luna wouldn't face punishment, continuing her normal life at the academy.

Of course, this would result in Professor Mcguire's proposal failing…

However, I plan to prevent this problem from happening at all.

Professor Mcguire's proposal event occurs a few days after Luna's presentation.

Before that, I will make Luna an offer.

I'll support her tuition fees.

After all, I have more than enough money to cover her tuition.

My goal isn't Luna.

Whether Luna goes with Evan or not is none of my concern.

My goal is the grimoire.

The grimoire Luna possesses is the record of the Royal Wizard Levian's life-long research.

For some reason, Levian met Luna before his death and passed the grimoire onto her.

That grimoire is a treasure.

A treasure beyond comparison to mere gold.

I'm powerful now.

But if you ask whether I can maintain this strength, the answer is "no."

It's challenging for someone like me, who's barely a genius, to keep up with their growth.

To maintain my strength, I must seize opportunities like these.

Opportunities unrelated to Evan.

Even if the event of Luna destroying the library doesn't happen, it won't affect the story.

If Evan doesn't pay attention to Luna, it's merely an event that gets recorded in the event log.

"Everything is going smoothly."

I've been paying attention to other aspects as well.

I've been keeping an eye on Evan's actions from time to time.

Evan was fully engrossed in his studies.

He didn't seem concerned about Luna and focused on studying.

He hadn't made contact with any other characters yet, so there was nothing else to worry about.

After attending all my classes, I headed to the cafeteria alone. Eating alone had become a familiar feeling.

"Hi there!"

A red-haired girl holding a lunch tray approached me.

"Can I sit here?"

Judging by her green scarf, she seemed to be a second-year student. Who is she, and why is she approaching me?

I rummaged through my thoughts.

Red hair… second year…

"Sure, have a seat."

This girl was the top second-year student and student council president…

"My name is Astina Persia."

She introduced herself with a smile.

* * *

Astina had investigated Rudy Astria.

A second son overshadowed by his outstanding elder brother… but calling him that would be too much of an understatement.

It was all too easy to hear about the unfortunate incidents that had occurred within the Astria family.

This was his problem.

Usually, it was difficult to find any bad rumors about the children of high-ranking families.

Their families would try to hide any such gossip.

However, Rudy Astria was an exception.

The rumor that he was a child abandoned by the Astria family seemed to be true.

The rumors about him at the academy weren't good either.

His brief speech during the entrance ceremony.

Many of the noble children said it had diminished the authority of the nobility.

They criticized him, saying it was an attitude only befitting commoners.

Moreover, his attitude during Professor Mcguire's class was enough to make everyone feel a sense of aversion.

But despite all that, his actions were quite ordinary.

He attended classes diligently and stayed in his room without going out.

The troublemakers she had seen would go out at night to enjoy themselves.

Of course, they didn't study, and some of them didn't even attend classes properly.

Rudy Astria's actions seemed like those of a typical model student.

"What is he up to?"

Why did he personally make people dislike him?

There was no reason to do so in the small society of the academy.

Even if he couldn't inherit his family later, that attitude was the worst if he wanted to enter politics.

Politicians would tear him apart even if he lived humbly.

Yet he intentionally created trouble for himself.

"Hmm…"

A smile formed on Astina's lips.

She thought she could understand why the strict Professor Cromwell had called him an interesting fellow.

Astina decided to meet him in person.

She thought it was difficult to judge him based on rumors alone.

Discovering that he ate alone every day, she targeted that time to approach him.

"Hello?"

An indifferent expression.

"May I sit here?"

"Yes, please have a seat."

Contrary to his arrogant reputation, he showed manners.

"I'm Astina Persia."

"I'm Rudy Astria."

Rudy introduced himself indifferently.

"Do you know who I am?"

"You're the top second-year student, right?"

He knew about her.

It was expected since she was quite famous at the school.

But his attitude was intriguing.

He was polite but did not engage in any other behavior.

His short answers kept the conversation from flowing smoothly.

It felt as if he was pushing her away.

And he didn't seem like someone who had been alone all this time.

Anyone who is constantly alone would feel lonely.

When someone approached them, they would usually try to speak more.

But he was different.

"Do you know why I came here?"

"I'm not sure."

"That's because… Huh?"

Rudy suddenly stood up from his seat.

"I finished eating, so I'll be going now."

Going?

Isn't he curious?

Why did she come here?

And…

"…I haven't finished eating yet."

Comparing the empty plate in front of Rudy to Astina's, she hadn't even started eating properly, and her plate was still full.

"Then, please enjoy your meal."

"Hey… If you leave, I'll be eating alone."

Flustered, Astina stuttered.

"I eat alone every day, and it's not that bad."

Rudy coldly turned around and left the cafeteria.

"Hey… Hey!"

Astina picked up her plate and chased after Rudy.

"Astina, hello!"

"Uh… Uh, hi!"

"Hello, senior!"

"Yeah, hi."

She wanted to throw away the food on her plate and chase after him, but her friends and juniors kept talking to her.

After greeting everyone and throwing away her food, Rudy's figure had already gone into the distance.

Astina halted in her pursuit.

“…What's with him?"

All she did was stare at Rudy, who was disappearing.

This treatment was a first for her.

Born in a viscount family, she grew up without being ignored by anyone.

Even at the academy, she never let go of her top position.

People of high status, and even the academy professors, never treated her like this.

grumble-

“…I'm hungry."

Astina, like an abandoned puppy, trudged toward the snack bar.

* * *

"Why do I keep getting involved with weird people?"

I grumbled as I headed to the next class.

Astina Persia, the top second-year student and student council president.

The student council election was coming up, and she was expected to be elected as the president.

I didn't want to get involved with Astina.

Astina wasn't a particularly important supporting character.

All the main stories revolved around first-year students.

There was usually no reason to interact with students from other grades.

She only showed her face occasionally, just when you'd almost forget about her.

It made sense, as if someone like Astina from another grade got involved in the main story, it would be resolved too easily.

Compared to the first-year students, her abilities would be like a cheat code.

I was already worried about the story getting tangled, so I tried to minimize interactions, no matter how lonely it got.

Then, I felt someone touch my back. When I turned around, there was a petite woman with brown hair.

"Luna Railer?"

"Um… Hi?"

Luna looked awkward as well, making a strange expression.

She was shaking like a small animal in front of a predator.

"Th-this, this class!"

Luna tightly closed her eyes and pointed to the classroom in front of us.

“…This class?"

When I looked at her with a puzzled expression, she stumbled over her words, unable to continue.

Then, she shoved a book in front of me: [Imperial Politics]. It was the class I was going to attend and happened to be a class Luna was in too.

"Uh…!"

Suddenly, Luna rushed into the classroom ahead of us.

"…?"

CHAPTER 7
LUNA RAILER (2)

Lately, Luna had been experiencing something strange.

Every morning, when she went to her locker to get her books, she found a piece of bread inside.

The same thing happened the day before, and the day before that.

Despite having eaten the bread at lunch, there would always be another piece the next morning.

This prevented her from going hungry, but she gradually started feeling uneasy.

Who could it be?

There's no such thing as a favor without a price.

That was something Luna had heard repeatedly from her father.

Of course, he said it to toughen up his naive daughter, but Luna didn't entirely agree with the statement.

The wizard she met didn't expect anything in return for giving her his magic book.

Luna believed that people sometimes offered favors without expecting anything in return.

However, that was only sometimes. If it continued, there must be a reason.

"How strange…" Luna stared at the bread in her locker.

Someone was definitely putting it there.

If there had been bread in the locker since the first day she used it, she might have

thought it was a magical locker that duplicated bread.

But the bread only appeared after she received it from someone.

A mysterious blonde man.

She suspected it could be him since the bread in her locker was the same as the one she had received that day.

But why?

Why was he putting the bread there?

To make himself look good? If he wanted to win her favor, he would have approached her directly instead of remaining unseen.

"Hmmmm…"

"Luna!"

"Ah!" Luna was suddenly hugged from behind by someone. It was her friend Rika.

"Rika, good morning."

Rika was a commoner, but she got along really well with Luna.

Luna considered herself closer to a commoner than a noble since she belonged to a low-ranking noble family.

She didn't think she was like the dignified nobles.

Luna felt more similar to the commoners than people like Rudy Astria, whom she had seen in magic theory class.

This way of thinking allowed her to get along with Rika even better.

"Why are you frowning so much?"

Rika clung to Luna's back and poked her furrowed brow.

Luna looked at her and opened her mouth.

"Rika, what would you do if a stranger kept giving you gifts?"

"What?" Rika's expression soured upon hearing that.

"No, no, it's not a serious matter. It's just…”

"How do they give you the gifts?"

"It's not about me. What if something like that happens? Just what if? You got it?"

Feeling that Rika might cause trouble, Luna told a white lie with good intentions.

"Alright, alright. So how did you receive it?"

Rika dismissed the issue with a wave of her hand.

"Well… It was in my locker…”

"Ena!!!"

As soon as Rika heard Luna's words, she grabbed her wrist and rushed into the classroom.

"Rika?"

Ena, who had been reading a book in the classroom, turned around at the sound of Rika's voice.

Rika, a magic department student, was different from Luna since Ena was an alchemy department student.

"Listen, Luna said."

Rika quickly ran to Ena and explained the situation.

Ena listened to Rika's words and hesitated for a moment before speaking.

"A stalker, huh?"

"Right? Isn't it?"

"Ah… no! It's just a guess, right? A guess?"

Luna looked at the two seriously contemplating and continued her excuse while waving her hands.

"Yeah, it's just a guess. But, that person is a stalker, right?"

Rika accepted Luna's guess but went on with a rather realistic piece of advice.

"How about asking for help from the student council or the disciplinary committee?"

Ena agreed as well. Faced with such realistic advice, Luna also began to ponder.

"But still, wouldn't that be going too far…?"

"Luna! What if they suddenly attack you?"

"Attack… seems a bit extreme… but maybe it's better to be cautious?"

Rika spoke animatedly while Ena expressed her concern with a worried face.

Luna somewhat agreed with the two.

It seemed necessary to be cautious.

"Alright…"

Even though she agreed, Luna felt uneasy about suddenly labeling someone who had helped her without causing any harm as a stalker.

Before going to bed, she hugged her pillow and pondered.

"Right… I feel guilty for just receiving their help, so I should at least thank them."

However, waiting in front of her locker in the morning was a bit scary.

As Rika had said, what if they attacked her?

And if they saw her waiting by her locker, they might not approach.

"Should I… hide and watch?"

Luna decided to hide and keep an eye on her locker the next morning. She wanted to find out who that person was.

The next day, Luna woke up early and hid, watching her locker.

Her disguise was somewhat clumsy, but it was difficult to notice her unless one paid close attention.

"Huh?"

The first person to appear near the lockers was Rudy Astria.

He went to his locker and picked up a few books.

"He's up earlier than I thought…"

Luna had gotten the impression that Rudy was somewhat like a delinquent in their Magic Theory class.

She had only heard bad rumors about him from other people, so she thought of him as a troublemaker.

But seeing him getting up early and taking out books made him seem more like an exemplary student.

"Well, he is the top student after all…"

Regardless of his attitude, he was the top student.

Even if his talent was great enough to secure the top spot, it must have taken effort to achieve it.

He had even surpassed the rumored prodigy, Princess Rie, to become the top student.

"Huh?"

But there was something strange.

The small paper bag in his hand. Luna had never thought Rudy Astria could be the person giving her bread.

They had no connection.

They only shared the Magic Theory class and one elective.

Their social status was worlds apart. Grades? There was no need to think about that.

"Ah, he must have brought it for himself to eat."

The paper bag was an ordinary one given out when buying bread at the store.

There was nothing special about it.

As Luna had thought, Rudy took a book out of his locker and turned toward the classroom.

Luna shifted her gaze back to the entrance, waiting for the students to start arriving.

"Oh, right."

Rudy Astria, who had been heading toward the classroom, suddenly turned around and slowly walked towards Luna's locker.

'…'

That's right.

The culprit was Rudy Astria.

Come to think of it, Rudy Astria looked exactly like the description of the first-year student mentioned by the seniors.

Sharp eyes and blonde hair.

Luna watched as Rudy placed bread in the locker and disappeared.

She headed to her locker, maybe he had put it in someone else's locker.

However, she had seen correctly.

There was a paper bag in her locker, and inside it was a warm, freshly-made bread.

A single word floated in her mind: Why?

Why did Rudy Astria put bread in my locker? Luna couldn't understand.

"Ugh…"

She thought her worries would lessen once she found out who was leaving the bread, but they only grew.

From that day on, Luna began to pay attention to Rudy.

Rudy Astria was more ordinary than she had expected.

He listened attentively during class and didn't pay attention to those around him.

He seemed to have no friends, as he ate lunch alone every day.

After class, he immediately returned to the dormitory and didn't come out.

He was too ordinary compared to the rumors.

No, rather than ordinary, he seemed a bit pitiful.

She had been watching him for three days, but she had never seen him converse with anyone.

"Luna!"

While she was deep in thought, Rika approached her, signaling that class had already ended.

It was lunchtime. Rika and Ena had invited her to eat lunch with them every day, but she had always refused, claiming she had something to do or was on a diet.

Instead, she ate the bread Rudy had left for her in the empty classroom.

"Do you want to have lunch…?"

Despite her constant refusals, they still invited her to join them for lunch.

Lately, even their expressions seemed apologetic when they asked. Luna felt guilty for always declining and thought she should at least eat properly.

“…Alright!"

Rika's expression brightened. Luna went to the cafeteria with her friends.

Upon entering, she saw Rudy eating alone, with no one else around him.

Her eyes were drawn to Rudy, who was eating his meal quietly and all by himself.

"Luna?"

"Ah… what?"

"So, did you report the stalker?"

Luna hesitated slightly at Rika's question.

She considered saying it was just her imagination, like last time.

However, both of them seemed to not believe that.

If she said it was her imagination, they would worry even more.

Should she tell her friends that Rudy Astria was the one giving her the bread?

While saying she didn't understand his intentions.

Luna thought about it for a moment but soon gave up.

Rudy Astria's reputation in the academy was the worst.

However, the Rudy she saw didn't seem like such a bad person.

She had only seen him for a very short time, but she couldn't find anything strange about him.

Luna stared intently at Rudy, who left the cafeteria after eating alone. Then, she made up her mind.

In the end, Luna decided to tell a white lie.

"Now, he doesn't put anything in it."

"Really? Did he hear our conversation?"

"Maybe?"

"That's creepy… Anyway, be careful for a while. He might come to harass you."

"Uh… Okay!"

Luna finished her day and returned to her room.

She didn't understand why Rudy Astria acted like that.

Luna sorted out the situation with the information she had gathered so far.

First of all, as Rika said, it was wrong to think he was a stalker.

She had been watching him constantly, but their eyes never met.

He was just studying diligently.

"Maybe… he needs a friend?"

Rudy Astria couldn't get along well with anyone.

If he had been an ordinary person, he wouldn't have introduced himself like that during class.

His words were very provoking.

An ordinary person would have known that.

Luna made an assumption.

Could it be that he lacked social skills?

As a child of a high-ranking noble, had he never made friends in an ordinary way?

He might want to make friends but not know how.

And giving her bread might be an action showing he wanted to be friends with her.

When she thought about it, the puzzle seemed to fit.

'That's right! I'll be his friend.'

The next day, Luna's resolve wavered when she saw Rudy.

Luna spotted Rudy Astria walking ahead.

And she tried to approach him, just like she had resolved the night before.

However, she had a question.

'How… do you make friends?'

Usually, they became friends without realizing it.

She never directly approached someone and said, 'Let's be friends!'

Moreover, the other person was a boy.

Luna, who had never made a male friend, wondered how to approach him.

'That's right! Let's go to class together!'

Anyway, this class was one they took together.

She thought she could at least suggest taking the class together.

So, Luna slowly approached Rudy.

Then, she tapped him on the back.

Rudy Astria turned his head and looked at her.

'Ah!'

Contrary to Luna's plan, her body froze in place.

Rudy Astria looked at her, as if to ask what was happening.

Luna's mind turned to stone.

'What was I going to say… Ah, right!'

Luna barely managed to open her mouth.

"Um… hi?"

Yes. Start with a slow greeting…

…

What should she say next?

Her mind went blank.

As Rudy Astria's sharp gaze pierced her, she began to feel scared.

'I wanted to ask if you'd like to attend this class together.'

"Th-this, this class!"

In her panic, Luna couldn't properly articulate her words and ended up blurting out a single scream.

Rudy Astria tilted his head, looking at her with a 'What are you talking about?' expression.

Feeling the need to explain herself, Luna thrust the book she was holding towards him.

'Th… this idiot!'

Luna was shocked by her own actions, and her face began to redden.

She quickly thought of a new plan.

'Let's… let's try again next time!'

Without properly explaining herself, Luna dashed into the classroom.

Even after entering the classroom and after the class ended, Luna didn't say anything to Rudy.

She simply ran back to the dormitory as soon as the class finished.

Luna entered her dorm room and confirmed that her roommates weren't there.

“…What did I just do?"

Luna lay on her bed and pulled the blanket up to her chin.

-Thump! Thump! Thump!

Only the sound of Luna's feet kicking the blanket filled the room.

CHAPTER 8
LUNA RAILER (3)

After Luna spoke to me,

her attitude seemed a bit odd.

Whenever I saw Luna Railer in the hallway, our eyes would meet.

However, she didn't talk to me, only looking surprised and then running away.

I wasn't exactly sure why she approached me.

The most probable reason was that she noticed me giving her bread.

There wasn't any other reason for me to be involved with Luna…

I wasn't doing anything other than studying.

More importantly, it was puzzling why Astina sought me out.

Why would someone who doesn't even interact with Evan get involved with me?

Nevertheless, I felt I managed to keep my distance.

I hadn't seen her since she visited me at lunch.

Anyway, Astina was busy with the upcoming student council election, so it wasn't a big concern.

"Today, I will give you your first assignment."

Today's first class was Professor Mcguire's Magic Theory course.

"We've been learning about magic circles, right? So, I'm going to give you an assignment to draw a magic circle."

Magic circle composition assignment.

Luna's time to shine was approaching.

"I won't ask you to create an extraordinary magic circle. Just add a few components to the basic magic circle framework."

Then, Professor Mcguire drew a simple magic circle on the blackboard.

"Let's say we have a magic circle that uses the Ignite spell. What would happen if we added acceleration to it?"

“…An explosion?"

Luna answered in a small voice.

Professor Mcguire nodded with a smile.

"Correct. The fire would appear as an explosion due to its rapid speed. To cause a proper explosion, you'd need to add a symbol for enhancement and adjust the control of mana."

After saying that, he wrote a few items on the blackboard.

1. Creativity 2. Efficiency 3. Activation Possibility

"We'll evaluate your work based on these three aspects. However, activation possibility is the most important. No matter how creative a magic circle is, it's meaningless if it can't be activated. Any questions?"

The students remained silent, so Professor Mcguire closed his book.

"There's no need to draw a magic circle that can be used in daily life or battle. Of course, it would be nice if you could draw such a magic circle, but that would be a typical one. Create an efficient and unique magic circle."

Even after saying that, the students' expressions weren't very positive.

Frankly, it was a huge burden for students who hadn't properly learned magic yet to create magic circles.

Seeing this, Professor Mcguire smiled slightly and said,

"Don't worry too much. As long as you put in some effort, I'll give you full marks. That's it for today's class."

A magic circle…

After finishing classes that day, I headed to the library.

I was worried about whether Luna could draw a proper magic circle, but first, I needed to draw one myself to get good grades.

It's possible to draw a magic circle just by looking at the textbook.

However, it would be better to have reference books as well.

Since there were barely any books other than textbooks in my dorm room, I had to go to the library to find many reference materials.

As soon as I entered the library, its magnificent appearance caught my eye.

Liberion Academy was not only the Empire's largest educational institution but also its largest research institution.

Professors here were both educators and researchers, like those in a university.

All the books needed by such researchers could be found in this library.

Of course, important materials were stored separately in the Imperial Library, but the place with the most resources was the library of Liberion Academy.

As I looked around, I saw a librarian organizing books.

I approached them.

"I'd like to find a book related to basic magic circles."

When I asked, they pointed in one direction and spoke.

"Basic magic circles can be found in Section C, bookshelf 7."

Following the librarian's directions, I found numerous books related to magic circles.

I picked one and headed to a desk in the corner of the library.

There, I saw Luna Railer studying with a few books.

Is she studying here?

Well…

Luna probably didn't get assigned to a good dormitory, so she lacks study space.

In my case, I have a single room and a well-equipped study environment.

But for students with poor grades, their dorms are shared rooms, making it difficult to study in the room.

There are students resting in the room and others chatting loudly.

I quietly pulled out a chair diagonally across from her and sat down.

Luna was so focused that she didn't even notice I had arrived.

I considered greeting her briefly, but I didn't want to disturb her concentration, so I just took my seat.

If I somehow ruined her focus and she missed out on a revelation, failing to get good results on the assignment, the story might get twisted.

No, even if the story isn't affected, my plan would be ruined.

So, I didn't bother Luna, who was concentrating, and started my own studies.

Several hours passed like this.

* * *

When I entered, the sun was still up, but now the twilight had faded, and it was dark outside.

Even though so much time had passed, Luna didn't move once and remained focused on her studies.

I stretched, feeling stiff, and fetched other books, but Luna didn't budge, immersed in her studies.

Her hands only moved occasionally to flip through pages or practice drawing magic circles on paper.

She truly excelled in the field of magic theory.

"Ugh…"

Luna seemed to be getting tired, raising her arm to stretch.

Hearing Luna's movement, I looked up, and our eyes met.

"Kyaaah!!!"

Surprised, Luna let out a loud scream.

"Why… Why are you here…!"

With wide eyes, Luna shouted at me.

Then, the librarian I saw earlier walked over.

"Excuse me…"

The librarian tapped Luna's shoulder and raised his index finger to his lips.

"I-I'm sorry…"

Luna apologized in a hushed voice to the librarian and then approached me.

"Why are you here? Could it be…"

"Could it be?"

"Stalking or something…!"

Stalking?

As I raised my eyebrows slightly, Luna flinched and stepped back a little.

I pointed at the book I was looking at.

"Didn't you see I was doing Professor Mcguire's assignment? Weren't you doing the same?"

"Ah…"

Luna glanced at the magic circle I drew and closed her mouth.

"I-I'm sorry."

Luna's face turned slightly red as she bowed her head in response to my words.

"Did you finish this assignment?"

As I changed the subject and asked, Luna nodded her head.

Already finished?

I felt a little anxious.

Could she have completed it so soon after the assignment was given?

I was taking a long time to draw an unusual magic circle.

But if she had already finished, she might have drawn a regular magic circle.

"Can I see it?"

I need to check.

"C-cheating is not allowed."

"I'm not doing that. Let's just exchange opinions on the assignment as friends. Sharing opinions could lead to better ideas."

"F-friends?"

Luna reacted to a strange part.

Is it weird to call her a friend?

Still, we're classmates taking the same course, so isn't it okay to call her a friend?

"Yeah. Friends."

"R-right. Friends."

"Right. So speak informally. There's no need for honorifics within the academy."

I spoke casually to Luna.

Although it was a bit off from my original image, I thought it was okay for Luna.

After all, I was planning to be Luna's sponsor once this assignment was over.

Then, Luna would be on my side anyway.

If Luna's grades improve and she receives a scholarship later, I don't have to sponsor her, but until then, she's on my side.

And acting casually isn't a bad thing, is it?

There's no harm to me even if people hear about it.

Rather, it could be a gain.

Rumors that I was thought to be a bad person but turned out to be okay could spread.

Well, even if rumors of me being casual spread, it would likely be treated as a baseless rumor.

"O-okay."

Luna brought the magic circle she drew.

"Huh?"

Upon seeing Luna's magic circle, dozens of question marks formed in my mind.

"It's a square?"

Luna's magic circle wasn't round.

It had a square shape with various magic formulas inside.

"Well… I did some calculations, and to use these formulas, a square magic circle is the most efficient."

The most basic theory of magic circles.

No. Just an accepted fact.

It's about putting magic formulas inside a circle.

The circle in the magic circle represents the control field of magic.

It's a control field for managing the central magic formula.

Maintaining an equal distance between the main magic formula written in the center and the control field makes it easier to modify the magic circle.

Different shapes require multiple calculations of control formulas due to the varying distances from the central magic formula.

On the other hand, a circle has an equal distance between the center and the edge, so it only requires one calculation.

That's why magic circles were typically drawn as circles.

"Can it be set up like this?"

I raised my head and asked Luna.

Since I still don't know much about magic circles, I wasn't sure if it would work or not.

"I just thought it would work, so I tried…”

Luna's expression seemed to question why I was asking.

"What if the magic circle doesn't activate?"

Surely, submitting it like this would earn high points for creativity.

However, as Professor Mcguire said, the most important thing is whether it activates or not.

No matter how unique the magic circle is, if it doesn't activate, it won't even receive basic points.

"Is it…? It seems like it would work… Should I fix it?"

Luna spoke with an uncertain voice.

"Hmm…”

If she were an ordinary student, I would have scolded them and told them to change it.

That would be the realistic approach.

Right now, that approach would be correct to get a good grade.

However, the one across from me is Luna Railer.

I wondered if such unconventional thinking made her a genius.

One reason why people say the rote learning education system in Korea is wrong is that it forces students to follow established facts and proven methods.

Adults teach children to take the safest and most comfortable path, rather than discover new facts.

When encountering unique individuals, they should teach that they are 'different' from us, but instead, they educate them as if they are 'wrong.' So, people tend to try to think like those around them.

Because those who are different are considered 'wrong.'

"Is it… a bit like that?"

As I kept staring at the magic circle without saying anything, Luna started to gauge my reaction.

"Can you follow me for a moment?"

"Eh?"

I grabbed the magic circle and headed towards my dormitory.

"Where are we going?"

Luna half-ran to catch up with me, as my pace was too fast.

I slowed down for her and spoke.

"The laboratory given to the top student."

"Th… the laboratory? At this hour?"

I went down to the basement of the dormitory.

There were several rooms in the basement.

Ignoring the other rooms, I headed to the one at the very end.

A light was coming from the magic circle next to the doorknob of that room.

'Put your hand here, was it…?'

After being assigned to a dormitory, the housekeeper who managed it came to inform me.

She told me there was a laboratory in the basement and to place my hand on the magic circle there to open the entrance.

When I touched the magic circle, the door opened.

I entered through the opened door.

"What are you doing?"

Although I went in, Luna hesitated to enter the laboratory.

Finally, as if she had made up her mind, she widened her eyes and entered the lab.

The lab wasn't an extraordinary place.

It simply had good soundproofing and was equipped to handle impacts.

To be honest, it didn't feel like a lab.

It was just a place where magic could be used freely.

It felt more like an experimental room.

"But why did we come here?"

"To try an experiment."

I began to copy the magic circle Luna drew onto a piece of paper next to it.

This paper wasn't ordinary.

It was infused with mana, making it suitable for using magic circles.

It's a 'temporary scroll.'

Though advanced magic circles required proper 'scrolls,' basic magic circles could be activated with these 'temporary scrolls.'

The magic circle Luna drew was unique but very basic.

So it should be possible to activate it with this paper.

After copying the magic circle, I looked at Luna.

"Let's give it a try."

I immediately tore the paper.

As the paper ripped, a bright light burst out.

"Wow…!"

The magic circle was activated, and small lights spread out around us.

Then, about four or five little lights began to fly around the room.

The main magic formula in the circle Luna created was from the fire element - Light.

It was a magic spell that illuminated the surroundings.

However, it wasn't just Light; it also had the effects of persistence and duplication.

Several small lights started to circle around us.

"Does… does it work?"

Luna stared blankly at the floating lights in the lab.

Seeing her like that, I gave her a slight smile.

Luna was 'different' from us.

If she hadn't received any education, she wouldn't have doubted this rectangular magic circle.

But because she had been educated with what was 'right' and 'wrong', she doubted herself.

"You're amazing."

As I told her that, she looked at me with a bewildered expression.

"I said, you're amazing."

I smiled at her and gave her a thumbs-up.

CHAPTER 9
LUNA RAILER (4)

"Luna Railer, well done."

"Th-thank you!"

Luna's magic circle received high praise from Professor Mcguire.

Using a shape other than a circle for a magic circle is, in fact, a technique used in the magic world.

It's true that circular magic circles are easier to create.

However, when striving for the utmost efficiency, it's said that magic circles can be made with other shapes as well.

The fact that she created such a magic circle without knowing this carries significant meaning.

Genius.

Is there any other way to describe her?

If you simply look at it, you might say, "Anyone could come up with that idea."

But conceiving it without any prior knowledge isn't easy.

And she did it.

Moreover, the fact that her magic circle activates is crucial.

There may be a few other students who thought of different shapes for their magic circles, due to the hint of creativity on Professor Mcguire's grading sheet.

Hearing the term "unique magic circle," people would typically think of a visually

distinctive one.

However, after a few attempts, most would give up.

For ordinary people, it's challenging to determine whether such a magic circle is efficient and to meet the activation requirements.

A regular person would find it more convenient to stick to established theories when designing a magic circle.

Luna stood out among these ordinary people.

She created her own magic circle and eventually completed it.

This was the mark of a genius, unlike ordinary individuals.

A genius isn't just someone who comes up with novel ideas.

A true genius is someone who explores and perfects their ideas.

"Everyone, let's give a round of applause."

Following Professor Mcguire's words, the students clapped for Luna.

Her face turned red, seemingly embarrassed, as she scratched her head.

Then, she caught my gaze and gave me a slight smile.

It was a different behavior from her previous avoidance.

Had she finally acknowledged me as a friend?

It was a positive change in our relationship.

Now, all I needed to do was propose my sponsorship to Luna.

The conditions for sponsorship weren't related to the magic book.

It would be under the conditions suggested by Professor Mcguire.

In exchange for receiving research results, I would provide sponsorship.

I hope to prevent the incident where Luna destroys the library.

Professor Mcguire asked Luna to produce results within a certain period.

However, I planned to make a different proposal.

I wouldn't specify a deadline; instead, I'd ask her to show me the results when they were ready.

This way, I could learn from the shared research and alleviate any time-related pressure on Luna.

This difference was crucial for Luna, who would eventually reach for 'that book' out of desperation.

Although the punishment for destroying the library wasn't severe, there was one crucial point.

The confiscation of the magic book Luna had used.

It was a natural consequence since the book had essentially caused the damage.

I intended to prevent the book's confiscation and use it myself.

There was no need to obtain the book hastily.

First, I had to reach at least the intermediate level in magic to utilize the book.

I'd slowly improve my magic abilities and borrow the book later.

I could take my time to decide how I'd borrow it.

I'd simply borrow it depending on the circumstances.

My current magic level was Beginner LV 6.

Upon reaching LV 9 and growing further, I'd obtain Intermediate Magic LV 1.

Until then, obtaining the book would be more harmful than helpful.

Moreover, borrowing the book wouldn't affect Luna's growth.

Her magic was still significantly weaker than mine.

In other words, even when I reached the intermediate level, Luna would still be using beginner magic.

It wouldn't be a problem to borrow the book for a while, as she couldn't use it anyway.

"Sigh…"

I mentally organized my thoughts and prepared myself.

I opened the notebook where I had roughly organized what I wanted to say.

As I skimmed through the pages, I saw the phrase I had written at the bottom.

"…Should I leave this part out?"

* * *

It was a peaceful day.

Not a single cloud marred the clear sky.

Luna sat alone in the garden and opened the paper bag.

As she sat on a bench beneath the shade, a cool breeze tickled her hair.

Luna brushed her hair behind her ears and took a bite of the bread from the bag.

A happy smile spread across her face as she chewed the bread.

"Hehe…"

Today was such a joyful day.

For the first time in her life, she received genuine praise for her magic.

It wasn't just an empty compliment, but high praise.

Luna's smile reached for the sky.

“…Hehehe…”

An involuntary, silly laugh escaped her lips.

Although she was eating the bread alone, it tasted sweeter than any feast she'd had at the mansion.

She owed her ability to receive such praise entirely to Rudy.

At first, she had been genuinely scared when he took her to the laboratory.

It was frightening to be led to a quiet place where no one else was around.

However, her worries had been unfounded.

Rudy was just as kind a friend as she had thought.

Luna didn't even have enough money for meals right now.

That's why she couldn't afford even a relatively inexpensive "temporary scroll."

She had considered asking Ena for help, or even switching to a regular magic circle.

But Rudy had been a lifesaver for her.

'Did Rudy know I don't have money?'

She had suspected as much when he gave her the bread.

But how did he know?

Luna's family wasn't famous.

So, there was no way Rudy would know or care about her family's financial situation.

They were just a small family in a remote region.

“…He seems kind, but also… not…”

Luna tilted her head in confusion, chewing on the bread.

"What's not?"

"Uh!"

Luna jumped in surprise at the voice coming from behind her.

Fortunately, the sound didn't travel far as she had a mouthful of bread.

"Ru… Rudy?"

Rudy stood behind Luna.

"Is the bread good?"

"Bread… Bread? Bread… Yes, it's delicious!"

Luna alternated her gaze between the bread and Rudy.

Had he never tasted it before?

He had always given it to her, but it seemed he hadn't eaten it himself.

Recalling her previous mistake, Luna tried her best to keep her composure and speak calmly.

She knew that Rudy put bread in her locker, but he didn't know she knew.

Saying, "I hid nearby and saw you putting bread in my locker!" would sound strange.

That would make her a real stalker.

"You did well in the presentation today. The magic circle seemed to be more refined, too."

“…Hehe, it's all thanks to Rudy."

Luna laughed in response to Rudy's compliment.

Feeling somewhat shy, she lowered her head and scratched her head.

Then, in a soft voice, she said once more:

"It's all thanks to Rudy…”

Luna couldn't be certain about the magic circle she created.

She wasn't sure if it was the right path.

Rudy was the one who told her it was the right way.

He gave her confidence in her path.

He infused confidence into the wandering Luna.

"If it weren't for Rudy, I might not have submitted it."

No matter how great a magic circle was, if it wasn't known to the world, it was meaningless.

It would have been nothing more than self-satisfaction.

So the magic circle could come into the world thanks to Rudy.

"Luna."

At Rudy's words, Luna looked at him standing there.

Rudy's face was utterly serious.

"I have something to say."

"Y-you do?"

Luna's eyes widened at Rudy's words.

Rudy, seriously talking to me?

Imaginations unfurled in Luna's head.

She stared blankly at Rudy with her mouth open.

Could it be… Rudy… likes me?

However, the words that came out of Rudy's mouth were truly unexpected.

"Do you want me to sponsor you?"

"Sponsor?"

"I'll support your tuition and research funds. I'll sponsor you under my name."

"…?"

Luna was bewildered by the sudden, out-of-the-blue statement.

And she felt embarrassed for her wild imagination.

'I… I was surprised.'

Luna calmed her pounding heart and slowly thought about Rudy's proposal.

It was common for nobles to support students.

Nobles would support students who struggled with tuition or who had low overall grades but excelled in one area.

It was a way to build connections with outstanding students early on.

"But… I'm still an inexperienced student, aren't I?"

However, Luna thought she was still lacking.

She had been praised in class this time, but couldn't it have been just good luck?

And she wondered.

There was no difference between her and other students.

She was just an ordinary student.

So she was curious.

"Why… did you offer it to me?"

Rudy simply said,

"Potential."

And he continued without hesitation.

"Your efforts and the results you've shown. Isn't that enough?"

"It might be a hasty decision. There's no guarantee I'll become an outstanding student."

Then, Rudy gave a faint smile.

"It would be a shame to miss out on talent right in front of me."

Rudy called me talented.

Luna felt warmth in her heart upon hearing those words.

Though she had hoped for a different confession, that confession was enough to make Luna happy.

However, Luna shook her head and regained her senses.

While she was grateful for his words, she couldn't help but wonder if there was an ulterior motive.

He had given her bread and even proposed sponsorship.

He must have expectations for her.

But no one knew what his intentions were.

Did he suggest it because he had a different idea in mind?

Could there be ill intentions behind it?

As Luna pondered, Rudy opened his mouth to speak.

"Um… and."

"Huh?"

"There's one more thing I want to say…"

At this, Luna felt a tinge of anxiety.

Was there indeed some hidden agenda behind his proposal?

Just when she was about to feel disappointed, she heard Rudy's words.

"Would you like to have lunch together?"

"…?"

"No, this isn't a condition for the sponsorship, I just thought we could have lunch together as friends."

Rudy, who usually didn't show much emotion, was visibly different this time.

His face had turned slightly red, and he frowned a little.

His expression was no longer charismatic and sharp.

Seeing him like this, Luna couldn't help but smile.

"Pfft…"

And she felt somewhat reassured.

Luna sensed that her initial thoughts about Rudy Astria needing a friend were accurate.

The concerns about the motives behind his sponsorship proposal and complicated thoughts flew out of her mind.

It wouldn't make sense for someone who said such things to sponsor her with the intention of harming her.

"Alright, I'll accept your proposal."

Luna replied with a smile.

At that, Rudy's expression relaxed.

"Then, I'm counting on you, my sponsor."

Luna grinned and reached out her hand.

Rudy grasped it and smiled faintly.

CHAPTER 10
STUDENT COUNCIL PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION (1)

Nothing ever goes exactly as planned.

Of course, in the grand scheme of things, it may appear that it did.

However, it's impossible for every small detail to proceed according to plan.

Countless variables exist.

Sometimes luck doesn't cooperate, and at other times, predictions may be off, causing things to go awry.

"Rudy Astria."

Such variables can be addressed with adaptability.

However, the outcome may change depending on the adaptation.

Nevertheless, one must make an effort.

To achieve the best possible results.

"Could you give me a hand?"

* * *

I could hear the students chatting in the classroom.

"Evan, a commoner, fought with Baron William's son?"

"They say Baron William's brat started the quarrel."

"Evan… I've never heard of him before… Well, at least that ruffian got what he

deserved. That's satisfying."

After making a contract with Luna, I devoted myself to my studies.

Even though I only focused on studying, the main story continued to unfold.

Evan caught the professor's attention during magic practice and even ended up fighting with some troublemakers.

Slowly, the protagonist began to make a name for himself at the academy.

When I heard the news, I felt relieved that Evan was growing well.

However, the news that followed made my head throb.

"Rudy Astria, could you please come to the discipline office for a moment?"

A student called out to me.

He wore a green scarf, indicating he was a second-year student.

On his arm was a badge with the word "Discipline."

The Discipline Committee.

At Liberion Academy, it was more than just an ordinary discipline committee.

Typically, students with average swordsmanship skills but lacking money for tuition would join the committee to earn some money.

However, the committee also oversaw criminal activities that occurred within the academy.

While they handled minor disputes, if a major incident occurred, the empire would dispatch investigators or professors would deal with it.

In a way, they were like local security guards with some power.

But why were they calling me?

I couldn't see a reason.

I hadn't been causing any trouble and had just been focusing on my studies.

There was no need for the discipline committee to involve me, as I hadn't done anything wrong.

With these questions in mind, I went to the office and saw the red-haired ruffian I had encountered before.

"Rudy Astria ordered it…"

"What?"

The ruffian pointed at me as he spoke.

I was puzzled by what he was saying.

"Rudy Astria, is this true?"

"I'm not even sure what's going on. What's the matter?"

When I asked, the committee member stroked his chin.

Ah…

I had a feeling I knew what was happening.

That red-headed ruffian had fought Evan and now accused me of being behind it.

This situation wasn't just my speculation.

If things had gone according to the original story, that's how it should have played out.

However, the current situation was slightly different.

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

The disciplinary committee briefly explained the situation, and I denied their

accusation.

However, this was the problem.

In the game, Rudy Astria would have denied responsibility after causing trouble himself.

The game's situation overlapped with my current predicament.

Even though I didn't do anything, people thought I was trying to evade the blame.

It was simply infuriating.

How should I explain this…

"Hmm…"

The disciplinary committee members shot me suspicious glances.

But nobody openly expressed their doubts.

Instead, they just kept watching me with suspicion.

This was giving me a headache.

In the game, Rudy Astria hung out with that guy, but I told him to leave me alone.

Ever since then, I hadn't seen him, and their suspicions only made my head throb.

I felt like just leaving this place, like Rudy Astria in the game.

"Why do you keep holding onto someone who claims they didn't do it?"

A man with his hand in his pocket approached us.

He was dressed casually, wearing glasses, and had a scruffy beard that seemed to be the result of not shaving for a few days, rather than intentionally grown out.

He looked like a typical middle-aged man who might be on his way to buy soju at the local supermarket.

"Ah… Professor."

"What's the point of holding onto someone who says they didn't do it? You think you're accomplishing something by trying to maintain security in the academy? You're not even investigators."

The man, referred to as a professor, grumbled and left the disciplinary committee room.

The second-year student who brought me in then spoke up.

"Go on."

As soon as I heard those words, I followed the professor who had just helped me.

Since he'd come to my aid while I was being falsely accused, I wanted to at least express my gratitude and ask for his name.

"Excuse me… Professor?"

I tried to start a conversation, but the professor ignored me and kept walking.

"Professor."

"Professor?"

"Professor? Can you hear me?"

When I kept following and talking to him, the professor finally turned around.

"Why do you keep bothering me?"

"Thank you for your help."

I expressed my gratitude, and he waved his hand dismissively.

"Fine, now go."

"May I ask your name, sir?"

The professor then gave a short response.

"Robert."

With that, he walked away with an air of nonchalance.

"Understood. Thank you."

I didn't want to be a nuisance, so I backed off.

"Robert…"

I mulled over the professor's name as I headed towards my next class.

* * *

After all the classes had ended, I was tidying up my books.

"Rudy!"

From afar, Luna approached with a worried expression.

"Rudy, are you alright? I heard you went to the student council room."

"Ah, I think it's nothing serious."

Surely they wouldn't call me back for questioning without any evidence.

If they did, I'd have no choice but to take a firm stance.

Regardless, my anger surged at the thought of letting that red-headed brat off the hook.

He probably knew what he was getting into when he used my name.

He knew my reputation as Rudy Astria wasn't great, so he figured he could use me.

In his mind, he'd probably avoided punishment as much as possible while taking revenge for when I told him to get lost last time.

What could a third-rate punk like him be thinking?

I wasn't going to let this slide.

If I let it pass now, something like this would happen again.

"I'm glad it's nothing serious."

Luna said, her expression relaxing.

"Oh! Are you going to the library today?"

Luna asked me with a beaming smile.

Behind her, two students glared at me.

Luna seemed oblivious to this, smiling innocently.

"I don't think I can go today."

"Is that so?"

Lately, I've been studying with Luna in the library.

Of course, when it came to practicing magic, we went to separate research rooms.

However, for theory-related studies and other subjects, we headed to the library.

Since she asked me every day to join her, I couldn't refuse.

"Luna, it's time for class. Shall we go?"

"Huh? Sure! Let's go."

When we studied in the library, it wasn't just the two of us.

Luna's friends were there every day as well.

Rika was quite open about her dislike for me, while Ena tried to peer into my heart like Princess Rie.

Their gazes made me uncomfortable, but they didn't interfere with my studies or cause me any harm, so I ignored them and carried on.

After finishing all my classes, I headed to the top student research room in the dormitory basement.

"Status window."

「Name: Rudy Astria Age: 17 Abilities: Beginner Magic: LV 6 Fire Attribute Magic: LV 5 Wind Attribute Magic: LV 4 Earth Attribute Magic: LV 2 Swordsmanship: LV 2 Elemental Magic: LV 2」

While studying magic alone, I had acquired Earth Attribute Magic.

Frankly, I didn't think I would use it much, but it was a necessary step to raise my magic level.

My Fire Attribute Magic was at level 5, and while it would become more powerful as it grew, its growth rate was too slow.

So, I resorted to a trick.

Instead of delving deeply into one type of magic, I learned several types to quickly reach intermediate magic.

As we advanced, basic attribute magic became less useful in battle.

Of course, it could be helpful if applied well.

However, I was an ordinary modern person.

A modern person who had never fought anyone before.

I didn't have the ability to think of various ways to apply magic in a fight with someone.

So, to defeat my opponents, overwhelming them with sheer power was the best approach.

For now, my goal was to quickly advance my basic attribute magic and reach

intermediate magic.

Then, I would learn dark magic among the attribute magics.

Dark magic wasn't well-regarded.

People perceived it as ominous because of the risk of mental contamination when spells failed.

But one thing was certain: the power of dark magic.

Everyone acknowledged that fact.

Dark magic boasted much greater power than magic of the same level.

It was a high-risk, high-return magic: dark magic.

"I was going to ask Professor Cromwell for a favor…"

Robert, one of the few dark magic professors at the academy, didn't have a family name, which was unusual.

I didn't know much about him since I hadn't seen him in the game.

All I knew was that he was close to Professor Cromwell, so I intended to ask Cromwell for an introduction.

"But why was he there?"

There wasn't much reason for the professor to be in the guidance room.

"Ugh… I'll think about that later."

Gathering mana in my hand, I recited the incantation.

"Water Ball."

Upon speaking, small water droplets gathered before my eyes.

"Should be good now. Status window."

「Name: Rudy Astria Age: 17 Abilities: Beginner Magic: LV 7 Fire Attribute Magic: LV 5 Wind Attribute Magic: LV 4 Earth Attribute Magic: LV 2 Water Attribute Magic: LV 1 Swordsmanship: LV 2 Elemental Magic: LV 2」

Finally, my beginner magic reached level 7.

It was a sweet accomplishment.

The hard work I put into Professor Cromwell's classes had paid off.

Knock knock

While I was relishing my achievement, I heard a knock on the door.

"Who is it?"

"It's Housekeeper Azela."

Housekeeper Azela was the chief administrator managing the dormitory.

I had encountered her before, but this was our first direct meeting.

"Come in."

"Hello."

Azela greeted me with a polite and upright posture, like a textbook example.

"What's the matter?"

"It's dinner time, and I noticed you haven't come out, so I thought I'd inform you."

Has it already been that long?

The laboratory had protective magic on all the walls, so there were no windows.

That's why I had been practicing magic without realizing the sun had set.

But did maids usually inform students about meal times?

I didn't know because I usually went to eat right on schedule.

Well, she was managing all the dormitory students, so it made sense.

I heard that female students received help with their hair and makeup, but as a male, I didn't need such assistance.

"And also…"

"…?"

"Miss Astina Persia asked if you would like to have dinner together if you haven't eaten yet."

"What?"

So that's why she came.

Why was that person calling for me again?

Wasn't leaving someone who hadn't finished their food a gentle refusal?

I thought she'd understand I didn't want to get closer…

I thought she had stopped paying attention to me, but apparently not.

She had a student council election next week and should be busy.

But I don't understand why she's doing this to me.

Should I tell her directly to stop approaching me?

It seemed better to meet her in person and talk since she would approach me again even if I avoided this meal.

"Tell her I'll meet her in front of the dormitory in 10 minutes."

"Understood."

I quickly tidied up the books and went to the dormitory entrance.

A red-haired woman stood there.

"It's been a while, Rudy Astria."

"Hello."

Astina usually wore her hair up, but today it was down.

Her usual look was too prim, giving off a stifling impression, but today she appeared more relaxed.

Astina's typical image was that of a stern female knight.

Although she belonged to the magic department, her demeanor was no different from that of a serious, aspiring female knight.

"Is it alright to keep your senior waiting?"

Astina wore a slightly annoyed expression as she spoke.

"I apologize. I didn't have time to prepare since you suddenly made plans."

You're the one who asked to meet so suddenly.

I came out within the 10 minutes I said I would.

I kept the appointment.

But with her saying that, I couldn't help but feel wronged.

Then Astina revealed a playful smile and opened her mouth.

"Just kidding. Let's go grab some food."

Are we even that close?

It would have been more understandable if Astina was genuinely angry, but this friendly attitude made it even more awkward.

What pace should I follow?

"Hello, Senior Astina."

"Yeah, hello."

As Astina walked, the surrounding students greeted her.

Being the top second-year student and a strong candidate for the student council president, she was the object of everyone's admiration.

Since she approached everyone warmly and never failed to return their greetings, people couldn't help but like her.

"Let's eat."

Astina accepted everyone's greetings, causing our mealtime to be slightly delayed.

And then…

"Who's that?"

"Isn't that Rudy Astria? Why is Senior Astina with him…?"

Everyone's attention was on us.

It was a headache.

I did my best to avoid drawing people's attention.

If someone disliked you and you kept being noticed, their opinion wouldn't change.

It would only remind them of their dislike.

So, I planned to lay low until people forgot about me.

Of course, I had to provoke Evan's competitive spirit and promote his growth.

But with my abilities lacking, I didn't have time to give him encouragement.

"I heard you've been studying hard lately. How's your progress?"

Astina continued the casual conversation, as if she knew my thoughts.

I vaguely answered her questions while looking for an opportunity.

An opportunity to tell her not to approach me anymore.

"Don't you find it boring to study all the time? Don't you have any hobbies?"

"Studying is my entire life."

It wasn't a lie.

If I didn't study now, I'd die later.

"Really? So you don't have any hobbies?"

"No, I don't."

As we continued our casual conversation, a question arose in my mind.

Did she call me just to have this kind of conversation?

Astina wasn't friendless like me.

She'd have these casual conversations all the time, so why come to me?

While we were talking, Astina's expression changed slightly.

"You know I'm running for student council president soon, right?"

"There's no one at the academy who wouldn't know."

Then Astina spoke with a completely different atmosphere.

"Rudy Astria."

A serious expression.

"Could you give me a hand?"

"…"

What kind of nonsense is this?

* * *

"Without Rudy Astria here, I feel so much more at ease."

"Rika! Don't be so mean to Rudy!"

Luna and Rika were on their way to eat after studying in the library.

Ena had said she would eat separately due to an alchemy experiment, so it was just the two of them.

Lately, Luna had been having lunch with Rudy.

However, unless they made plans, they didn't eat dinner together.

"Uh…?"

While Luna was getting her food, she noticed a familiar face.

"Rudy?"

It was definitely Rudy Astria.

But he was in a rather unexpected situation.

He was eating with someone else.

And that someone was a girl.

CHAPTER 11
STUDENT COUNCIL PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION (2)

Top second-year student.

Daughter of Viscount Persia.

Next student council president.

Titles like these made Astina shine.

Although there were people more outstanding than her, they didn't ignore her.

They respected her, thinking she could catch up to them someday.

However, Rudy Astria was different.

"What on earth?"

Even after being rejected by Rudy Astria, Astina continued to investigate him.

At first, it was out of curiosity, but now it was out of resentment.

Of course, considering the reputation of the Astria ducal family, she thought they might behave this way.

The top wizard family of the empire and the most arrogant family.

Everyone knew of their fame.

But it felt terribly unfair to her that she had been treated this way by Rudy Astria.

In terms of magical ability and social life, Astina was more accomplished.

Yet, she couldn't fathom why he ignored her.

"Did he study all day today, too?"

"Yes."

Astina had the dormitory maids report on Rudy's activities.

It wasn't something the maids should be doing.

However, there was nothing money and fame couldn't achieve.

"Studying nonstop since the entrance ceremony… for a month?"

At first, Astina thought nothing of Rudy's studying for a few days.

But gradually, she sensed something was off.

Didn't he get tired?

Rudy Astria studied even on weekends without taking a break.

Of course, he was often seen shut in his room.

He might have been resting in his room, but seeing him studying at the library lately made her doubt it.

An incredibly hard worker.

That's the only thought she had.

She believed she studied diligently too, but she didn't study without a single day off for a month.

She would chat with friends, go to places like bakeries to eat sweets, or go shopping.

However, Rudy Astria had none of that.

Recently, it seemed he had become friendly with a female student named Luna Railer.

Yet, there were no sightings of them going out to have fun or chatting happily

together.

They were only seen studying at the library.

I could make an educated guess at this point.

The reason Rudy Astria was abandoned by his family.

It might be due to a lack of talent.

Although he had exceptional magic skills for a first-year student, his abilities fell short compared to other members of the Astria family.

His older brother had achieved numerous accomplishments, such as becoming the academy's student council president as soon as he entered the academy and graduating as the top student.

Rudy Astria, who only managed to secure the top seat and failed to stand out in other ways, couldn't help but be compared to his older brother.

Considering the current situation, it wasn't because Rudy lacked effort compared to his brother.

Nor was there anything unusual about his behavior.

The only explanation left was a lack of talent.

Even with tireless effort within the family, he was still far inferior to his brother.

Seeing this, the head of the family decided to focus all resources on Rudy's brother and cast Rudy aside like a discarded child.

This was the story Astina Persia had imagined for Rudy Astria.

"Hmm…”

Were they kindred spirits?

Astina's reason for working so hard at the academy was to inherit her family's title.

There were currently two heirs in the Persia family.

Astina's older brother and Astina herself.

Astina's older brother wasn't particularly exceptional.

However, he was older than Astina and already held a knighthood, making him a strong contender to be the family's successor.

Astina didn't like this.

She felt that her brother would inherit the family simply because he was born before her.

She wanted to overthrow this.

To do so, she needed to make a remarkable impression.

Her magical abilities were exceptional since her first year, so there was nothing more to say on that front.

That's when she came up with the idea of becoming the student council president.

She believed that if she demonstrated her capabilities as president, she could change her father's mind.

Being the student council president of Liberion Academy held significant meaning, after all.

In this regard, she saw similarities with Rudy Astria.

Perhaps he was striving so hard to gain recognition from his family.

He seemed to be walking an even more challenging path than her.

Astina's brother was a prodigy, but Rudy Astria's brother was known as the empire's greatest genius wizard.

While she struggled to surpass someone ordinarily exceptional, what kind of path was Rudy Astria walking?

A faint smile appeared on Astina's lips.

"I want to watch."

She wanted to see the path her kindred spirit would take.

Would he meet his demise?

Or would he persevere and achieve what he desired?

And she wanted to provide a little help as well.

Because she knew what kind of path it was.

She knew it was a difficult and arduous journey.

* * *

Liberion Academy's student cafeteria.

"Could you help me out?"

Astina wanted to keep him close.

So, the method she came up with was to bring him into her student council.

It was an excellent way to watch over him and understand his abilities.

Though he was the top student, she didn't know the extent of his abilities or what skills he possessed.

She wanted to know how good he was at magic, theory, handling paperwork, and understanding politics.

"I refuse," Rudy said firmly.

This response was expected.

"Answer sheets of previous exams."

Astina had a secret weapon prepared.

Rudy Astria wanted good grades.

If he wanted to improve his magic skills, he would have stayed in the research lab.

Of course, theoretical study was important for magic, but understanding the structure of magic and using it frequently was crucial.

Rudy Astria spent time not only in the research lab given to top students but also in the library and his room.

This meant he studied to achieve good grades.

So, she prepared answer sheets of exams.

"I'll give you the answer sheets of exams from the past five years."

Astina said to Rudy with a charming smile.

Then, Rudy's eyes wavered.

Astina added one more thing.

"You won't be able to get it anywhere else. I'm the only one who's collected this many answer sheets."

The truth of this statement wasn't certain.

However, it was probably true that she had more answer sheets than other students.

Even if it was a lie, it didn't matter much.

Rudy Astria had no friends other than Luna Railer.

Not only friends but also no acquaintances among seniors or close professors.

It was natural since he didn't socialize and studied every day.

So, he had no way to obtain or know about the answer sheets of previous exams.

"How about it? If you have the answer sheet, it won't matter if you have less study time."

Rudy Astria began to waver.

Astina thought he would accept, given his desire for good grades.

Just as she was about to smile victoriously, a voice came from behind.

"Rudy! Hello!"

Astina turned around to see Luna Railer.

"Did you come to eat?"

"Uh… Luna."

Luna Railer naturally sat next to Rudy Astria.

Despite Astina sitting in front of Rudy, Luna ignored her and spoke to Rudy.

Then, Riku, who followed Luna Railer, sat down opposite Astina and was surprised to see her.

"Ahh… Astina, senior! Hello!"

"Right, hello."

Astina casually greeted Riku and looked back at Luna Railer.

Then, she smiled sarcastically.

"I'm sorry, but we're having an important conversation. Can you move to another seat?"

Astina was slightly annoyed by Luna Railer's attitude.

Why was she, from a small baron family, interrupting their conversation?

"An important conversation? Is it something I shouldn't know?"

Luna grinned at Astina.

To others, it looked like an innocent smile, but to Astina, it was irritating.

Why was she suddenly appearing and interfering when she had almost caught the fish?

"It's not that important. I was just discussing a favor she asked of me."

Rudy explained the situation to Luna.

"A favor? What kind?"

"It's related to the student council, but I haven't heard the details yet."

Hearing that, Astina spoke up.

"It's about the secretary position."

Astina tilted her head.

Her plan had been slightly disrupted.

She had intended to vaguely ask for Rudy's help and then bring him into the student council.

She planned to pressure Rudy with a significant reward and get an answer, but Luna's presence ruined the atmosphere.

Rudy asked Astina, "Are you asking me to join the student council?"

"No, I just need you to handle the tasks while the position is vacant."

Though she said that, she could keep Rudy on the hook if she left the position open.

Astina intentionally avoided mentioning proper terms, aiming to keep Rudy involved.

Later, she planned to present proper conditions and have him continue as secretary.

"How long is the period?"

However, Luna sharply questioned the details.

“…I haven't thought that far ahead. Let's decide slowly."

Astina found Luna increasingly annoying. Who did she think she was?

Rudy asked, "Do you want the answer sheets?"

"Answer sheets?"

"Astina offered to give me the answer sheets of exams from the past five years if I fulfill her request."

Rudy explained when Luna expressed doubt.

However, someone else was surprised by this fact.

"Five… Five years of answer sheets? Why not do it? You even get the secretary position–!"

It was Rika, who had been sitting nearby.

"Can you be quiet?"

"Rika, please be quiet."

Luna and Astina both spoke to Rika at the same time.

“…Yes."

Overwhelmed by their presence, Rika bowed her head and began eating her meal.

"But Rudy is busy studying. If he takes the secretary job, he'll have less time to study, right?"

Luna spoke with an innocent expression, as if she had no ulterior motives.

Her face seemed to say, "I don't have any intentions; I'm just worried about you."

"With the sheets, he can study more efficiently, reducing the time needed for it."

Astina quickly intervened.

Her face was smiling, but a vein was bulging on her forehead.

What began as a negotiation between Rudy and Astina had turned into a battle of wits between Luna and Astina.

Rudy thought for a moment before speakin

g.

"Could you give me some time to think about it?"

"That's fine. Give me an answer within this week. I'd prefer a positive response."

Astina grinned and stood up from her seat.

"I'll leave first."

As Astina returned to her room, she pondered.

Luna Railer.

Why was she interfering like this?

It was irritating.

But it wasn't a big deal. Rudy would have a hard time refusing her offer.

He was like her, after all.

Someone who wants to achieve their goals.

* * *

"Ah, Luna."

After finishing our meal in the cafeteria, Luna and I stepped outside.

"I have a magic circle I want to create. Can you help me with it?"

"Magic circle?"

Luna tilted her head, curious.

"I need it for something."

Neither Luna nor I were skilled enough to create a proper magic circle yet.

However, I thought that if we combined our powers, we could make a decent one.

"What kind of magic circle?"

"Silent."

Silent, an intermediate magic, blocked surrounding noise.

I couldn't use it now, but I could create it as a magic circle.

Magic circles didn't require proficiency; if a properly drawn magic circle was on a 'scroll,' it could be used.

"I want to make a quiet space a bit larger."

Normally, the Silent magic could only be used in an incredibly small area.

But by using a magic circle, I hoped to make it effective in a larger space.

"An intermediate magic circle… I've never made one before… But I'll give it a try."

Upon hearing this, Riku, who had been standing nearby, looked at me suspiciously and asked menacingly,

"Where do you plan to use it?"

I had a specific place in mind for that magic circle.

The red-headed…

"Education."

I slightly raised the corner of my mouth.

"I want to use it for some education."

CHAPTER 12
STUDENT COUNCIL PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION (3)

The next day, I accepted Astina's proposal.

Honestly, it was difficult to refuse.

Of course, the arrangement was only until the end of the event that take place after midterms.

That was the maximum duration I had in mind.

And there was another reason:

I believed that I could use the student council position well when the story progressed to the extra classes.

Upon agreeing, I received the answer sheets immediately through the maid.

Receiving the sheets made me feel a bit uneasy.

Nevertheless, since I wasn't officially joining the student council and was just temporarily helping out, it didn't seem to be a big problem.

The secretary role didn't involve doing anything in front of others, and as Astina said, having the sheets could shorten my study time.

Upon reflection, I was getting a tremendous benefit from this arrangement.

However, that's what made it feel more unsettling.

What did they want from me in return for giving me this?

Thinking about it, answer sheets weren't exactly a precious item.

No matter how valuable the answer sheet was, basic knowledge was still the most important thing.

Yet, for me, it was an incredibly valuable resource.

I didn't have connections or information.

But I take pride in studying as hard as anyone, if not more.

I even spent the time I could have used to gain connections or other information studying.

If I had the answer sheets of previous exams, it would be like having wings to soar.

With increased study efficiency, I could also invest more time in magic training.

Astina was aware of this fact as well.

She knew that if she used the answer sheets of previous exams as a condition, I would likely accept any reasonable proposal.

However, Astina's proposed condition wasn't a big deal.

It was something I would have accepted even without any conditions.

If I participated in the student council during my first year, it would guarantee me a high-ranking position in the student council during my second year.

But this condition was far from ideal for me.

When I become a second-year student, Princess Rie must take the position of student council president.

In the game, Rudy Astria and Princess Rie compete for the student council president position through an election.

Of course, it was a crushing defeat for Rudy Astria.

But, if I were to join the student council, wouldn't people's perception of me change?

If I become the student council president in my second year, it would be a headache.

I wouldn't have time to study, so what kind of student council president would I be?

It was an exquisite mix of an appealing condition and a proposal I wanted to avoid.

"Maybe it's not a coincidence that she's the top student…"

It seemed like she had done her homework on me.

I started to worry.

The image of Rudy Astria I wanted to portray was unlikable but not terrible.

But now, perceptive people were starting to see through me.

At this rate, my image would become that of a hardworking high-ranking noble's child.

Should I start causing trouble in front of Evan?

* * *

The next day, I headed to the place where the student council was gathering after class.

"Oh, Rudy Astria's here?"

There were a few people inside, besides Astina.

Most of them were wearing green scarves, so they must be second-year students.

Only one person wore a red scarf.

"Let me introduce the student council members. This is the vice president…"

I half-listened and let the information go in one ear and out the other.

There was no reason to remember the names of people I wouldn't see much.

Instead, I was interested in the one first-year student present.

He had a plump body and sharp eyes.

His face looked familiar.

"And this is Locke Lucarion, a first-year student like you. Have you heard of him?"

The son of the Northern Marquis, mentioned by Princess Rie.

It was Locke Lucarion.

"Doesn't it bother you to be around such a country bumpkin, young master?"

Locke approached me and sneered.

"Locke."

Astina then reprimanded him.

"Yes, yes, I understand."

Locke casually replied and stepped back.

I recalled that Locke participated in the student council during his first year.

I smirked arrogantly.

There was no reason to appear weak to someone who started a fight like that.

"You're quite the barbarian. Is everyone from the North like this?"

"What did you say?"

Locke tried to confront me with a fierce expression, but Astina stopped him with an outstretched hand.

"Rudy Astria, restrain yourself. This is our first meeting."

Astina's face was different from usual, exuding authority.

"Understood."

Locke Lucarion.

He was one of the prominent supporting characters in the Swordsmanship Department.

In the future, he would become the vice-president of Princess Rie's student council.

Of course, he frequently stood out in other events as well.

Due to his unique, easygoing, and bold personality, he was one of the likable male characters around Evan.

Although I didn't know why he was currently in Astina's student council, it was good news for me.

For starters, he had a lot of combat experience in the north, so he excelled at swordsmanship but was quite dense.

This meant that he was easy to manipulate.

Anyway, he wasn't someone that had much influence in the story, so I could use him as I pleased.

The only problem was that Princess Rie was behind him.

"Let's end it here for today. We'll gather again on the weekend to discuss how we'll run the election campaign."

With Astina's words, everyone prepared to leave.

As I was about to leave, Astina grabbed me.

"Rudy Astria, stay for a moment."

As Astina said this, Locke grinned, seemingly pleased, and left.

After everyone else had gone, I asked Astina a question.

"What's the matter?"

"I called you to discuss the upcoming election."

There was only one thing to say about the election.

"Do you want me to stay out of it?"

Honestly, even if I were to do something here, Astina would become president.

Her opponent was an extra with no known name or face.

It didn't seem like they were that famous in the academy either.

So, it was practically set in stone that Astina would become president.

However, the biggest obstacle here was probably me.

If word got out that I had joined the student council, some people might cast votes against her just to oppose me.

It could be backlash against the Astria family or actions driven by dislike for me, but it was certain that I was an obstacle in the student council president election.

However, what I heard next was completely contrary.

"I was going to ask you to help with the election campaign."

“…Excuse me?"

"You have a valuable name, Astria. So, if you participate in the campaign, won't it help?"

Astina grinned as she spoke.

"…”

What was she trying to do?

Even the dim-witted Locke would know that this wasn't a rational decision.

"I'm leaving the first-year side to you and Locke. I don't know much about the first-years anyway."

Astina definitely knew more first-year students than I did.

I wondered what her intentions were in saying this.

"Fine… I understand."

I wanted to say it was absurd, but I held back.

Someone else would advise her, even if I didn't.

It would also be strange for me, who had only recently met her, to comment.

"Alright, see you next time."

Astina waved with a smile.

I didn't know what she was thinking, but she was smart, so I believed she would handle it.

With that, I headed to Professor Cromwell's office.

* * *

Professor Cromwell's office.

"Even though he was called a young wolf, he's just a harmless puppy."

Professor Robert spoke, half-lying on the sofa.

"Aren't puppies and wolf cubs similar at that age?"

Professor Cromwell, wearing glasses he didn't usually wear, replied while looking at some documents.

"I heard he's arrogant and rude, so I thought an interesting guy had finally arrived, but he's just a harmless pushover."

"Are you sure you saw the real Rudy Astria? Last time, he got mad at me and handing in a blank exam."

Robert protested, getting up from the sofa as he listened to Cromwell's laughter.

"Either way, do you think I would mistake someone else for him? The student council brought him, so it must be right."

"What made you so curious that you went to the student council?"

"He's from the Astria family, and his personality seemed interesting, but he's nothing special. Are siblings' personalities usually so different?"

"They grew up in different environments, so wouldn't that be the case?"

Rudy's older brother, who grew up receiving attention from everyone.

And Rudy Astria, who didn't receive any attention at all.

Cromwell thought the difference in their personalities was inevitable.

"Just looking at him made me feel bad, but not as bad as his brother."

"Why do you hate him so much? He was polite to the professors and had good social skills."

Robert shook his head as if exasperated.

"I hate those kinds of people the most. They lack humanity. Humanity."

Robert then got up and went towards the door.

"Are you leaving?"

"Of course."

As Robert opened the door to leave, someone was standing in front of it.

"Um?"

It was Rudy Astria.

"Hello, Professor Robert."

"Did you hear?"

Robert bluntly asked Rudy.

"What do you mean?"

Rudy asked back, expressionless.

"If you didn't hear, it's fine. Are you here to see Cromwell?"

"Yes."

"Cromwell, Rudy Astria is coming in."

"I see. Come in."

Robert said that and went on his way.

Rudy glanced at the departing Robert and then entered Professor Cromwell's office.

"Professor, hello."

"What brings you here? You could ask questions during class time."

"It's not related to class. It's about something I'm studying separately."

"What is it?"

Cromwell took off the glasses he was wearing and asked.

Rudy showed him a piece of paper.

"It's a Silent Magic Circle. I'm thinking of a range of about 100 meters in radius from the casting location."

Cromwell looked back and forth between the magic circle and Rudy Astria.

The magic circle was better made than he expected.

Especially the efficiency of the magic circle, meaning it was designed to use minimal mana during casting.

However, there were many flaws.

"If you draw it like this, it will activate in a smaller area than an ordinary Silent Magic Circle, let alone 100 meters."

Cromwell picked up the fountain pen in front of him and checked the problems with the magic circle.

"For Silent Magic, you should use the duplication rune instead of the enhancement rune to expand the range. If you use the enhancement rune, it will only eliminate louder noises within that space. And you can improve this part by recalculating the formula."

Professor Cromwell closely examined the magic circle while speaking indifferently.

He then asked Rudy Astria.

"Did you create this magic circle by yourself?"

"No, I made it with Luna Railer. Luna took care of the control sector while I crafted the inner magic formula."

"Luna Railer, huh?"

The student who caught Professor Mcguire's attention last time.

Professor Cromwell was slightly surprised, as the magic circle's control sector and arrangement of formulas were almost at an assistant's level.

This maximized the efficiency of the magic formula.

'As for the magic formula… '

However, the magic formula that Rudy Astria had created was only at the level of an outstanding student.

"Hmm…”

Professor Cromwell handed the paper with the magic formula back to Rudy.

"It seems you need to study more about magic circles. Although my class is practical, you should put more effort into theory classes as well."

Professor Cromwell didn't hesitate to offer advice.

He appreciated seeing the discarded child of the Astria family studying diligently without becoming twisted.

He thought it was a professor's role to guide such a student well.

"But…”

He felt there was one more thing that needed guidance.

Cromwell narrowed his eyes and stared at Rudy Astria.

"Where do you plan to use that magic circle?"

Silent Magic circles were prohibited from being sold.

Even if they were sold, records of the buyers were kept somewhere.

Silent Magic itself was treated cautiously since it was so useful for criminal purposes.

However, it was also famous among wizards as a good magic to study.

Because its activation method was unique compared to other magic, it was recommended to learn at Liberion Academy.

The academy was a learning and research institution.

Thus, they allowed the use of even magic of dubious use outside for research or study purposes.

Of course, the user would be responsible if any scandalous incidents occurred.

"It's just for studying."

Rudy looked straight into Cromwell's eyes without avoiding them.

After a brief staring contest, Cromwell sighed.

"Ha… Fine. I understand."

He added further.

"I won't inquire more because you're a diligent and passionate student. So, be careful with your actions."

"I'll keep that in mind."

With no change in expression, Rudy Astria replied and walked towards the door.

Professor Cromwell called out to him.

"Rudy Astria."

"…?"

After a brief pause, Professor Cromwell said.

"Just make sure it won't cause any trouble."

“…Understood."

With that, Rudy Astria left the room.

"How could that guy be a puppy?"

A Silent Magic spell that activated within a 100-meter radius of a person.

Anyone could see it was a magic circle to prevent criminal disturbances.

"Baron Williams was it…?"

What a foolish guy.

He should have chosen his target wisely, but he messed with the wrong person.

* * *

The next day, after class ended.

"Ru-Rudy Astria?"

A guy with a red head, probably from the Baron William's family, stood before me.

Delinquents always seem to like these narrow alleys.

A narrow alley with a lone person.

The perfect situation to educate someone.

I took out the prepared scroll in advance.

As the top student, I had received a scroll with the Silent Magic engraved on it.

"What is it?"

-Tear

As I tore the scroll, a bright light leaked out.

"Wha… what's going on?"

I walked forward and opened my mouth.

"Let's get started."

CHAPTER 13
STUDENT COUNCIL PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION (4)

"R-Rudy Astria! Calm down and listen to me…!"

The red-haired student started backing away as I slowly approached.

"I-I'll use magic if you come any closer…!"

Ignoring the threat, I continued forward.

"Fire-!"

"Dig."

I cast a spell before he could use his magic.

As I cast it, the ground under the red-haired student gave way.

He fell, his face filled with fear.

"Uh… D-Don't come closer!"

"Ignite."

I uttered the incantation.

The most basic fire magic.

A spell that creates a small flame at a single point.

It had no lethal power, but it was enough to make him suffer.

I grabbed his arm and brought the flame closer.

"Aaaargh!!!"

He began to writhe in pain.

His clothes were pierced, and the smell of burning flesh filled the air.

I didn't have a perverse taste for torturing others, so I didn't enjoy it.

But this was the most effective method.

People were weak to pain.

Especially someone like him, who had never experienced real pain before.

"I'm sorry!!! I said I'm sorryyyyyy!!!"

"Are you speaking informally? Am I your friend?"

"I… I apologize!!! Aaaah!!!"

He apologized, but I didn't stop.

I just continued to sear his arm without a word.

"Aaargh!!! Haaah…"

I momentarily lifted the flame, and he gasped for breath.

Tears streamed down his face.

As I tried to bring the flame to his arm again, he yelled at me.

"Stop… please…! I had no choice… Garwel said it would be easy if I did it this way!!!"

Garwel?

The sudden mention of his name puzzled me.

Garwel Handrei.

He was the offspring of the Handrei Baron family.

In the original story, he served under Rudy Astria.

Of course, they weren't allies, and he merely held a position as a sycophantic subordinate.

However, Garwel was more than just a flunky.

Midterm Camp.

He was the mastermind behind the events that happen during the midterm camping evaluation which occurs after the exams.

“…Tell me more."

"Garwel said that if we just claim Rudy Astria ordered this, everything would be resolved…”

I frowned.

In the original story, I thought Rudy Astria merely ordered Evan to be harassed, but now it seemed different.

Garwel manipulated Rudy Astria, using the red-head student.

And Garwel must have told the red-head student that if they were honest, they could survive.

In other words, Rudy Astria in the game was simply being used by Garwel.

However, it appeared that my actions had changed the outcome.

This is insane… A baron or marquis would try to manipulate a duke?

It made the following stories a bit more understandable.

"He did it because he was scared."

"Huh…?"

"Never mind."

I released his arm and got up from my seat.

I thought Garwel might have done it.

He was part of the Rebels anyway.

Midterm Camp was the first appearance of the Rebels in the game, an essential part of the story.

Garwel was a member, and the story involved him causing a commotion and getting subdued by Evan.

The story of subduing Garwel was secondary, and the main story revolved around a heroine who was a member of the Rebels.

I could confront Garwel now, but there was no need.

Once the Midterm Camp starts, Evan will take care of him.

There's plenty for Evan to gain from the situation, so I don't need to get involved yet.

"What happened here didn't happen. If the others around you bother me, it's not you but your family that will crumble."

"Ah… I understand. I will manage it well…"

As I walked away, I thought.

Honestly, I knew about the stories of the heroines and Evan.

However, I didn't know the stories of the surrounding characters.

There must have been a reason for the events that happened.

I didn't realize that these small incidents were related to the main story.

"I need to be more careful."

Now that I discovered the small incidents were connected to the main story, I had to act more cautiously.

If Evan doesn't gain abilities from these events, it would be disastrous.

Usually, it took a tremendous effort to obtain abilities from significant events.

So, I had to ensure that all events occurred normally.

"What a headache."

I wondered if I should reconsider Astina's proposal.

There were no main or side stories related to Astina, so I decided to go along with it for the agreed-upon period.

* * *

Over the weekend,

Luna, Ena, and Rika were together in the library.

Rudy hadn't joined them, saying he had something to do, so it was just the three of them.

They were taking a break from studying for a moment.

"Rudy did that?"

"He's finally showing his true colors! That jerk…"

Rika spoke animatedly, waving her arms.

Rumors.

The three were discussing a rumor.

The rumor that Rudy Astria had ordered the son of Baron William to bully Evan.

"Umm…"

"Ena! Say something!"

Rika shook Ena, urging her to speak up.

"I'd rather not."

Ena wore an expression of disapproval.

After a moment of hesitation, Luna spoke up.

"Could it be that the rumor is spreading incorrectly?"

"No, it's true. You saw Rudy Astria being taken to the student council last time too. Everyone at the academy is now saying he did under Rudy Astria's orders."

Luna considered Rika's words.

Why would Rudy do such a thing?

There was no reason for Rudy to torment Evan.

"Just look at it! Lately, Evan, a commoner, has been gaining popularity, so the high-ranking noble must have felt uncomfortable!"

Luna remembered when Rudy introduced himself.

His dismissive remarks.

He had made statements that belittled everyone.

However, Rudy didn't favor nobles over others.

He simply wasn't interested in most people.

He had never treated anyone differently based on their social status, whether they were nobles or commoners.

He didn't seem to care about Rika and Ena, both commoners, but he never ignored them either.

"I think there might be some misunderstanding."

Luna believed in what she saw.

Rudy was a kind, caring, and a bit of a clumsy person.

"Come to think of it…"

She had seen Rudy with a viscount's son before, right after their first class.

"It seemed like he said something mean, but…"

She remembered Rudy telling the viscount's son to "get lost."

At first, she thought he was being mean to his friends, but now it seemed different.

Could it be that Rudy knew those people were bad?

And in retaliation, they trapped him.

"Rika, I saw this happen…"

Luna shared the story with Rika and Ena.

Rumors were just that—rumors.

People would interpret actions based on what they wanted to believe.

Even a harmless action could be twisted by those spreading rumors.

Not only the meaning but also the action itself could be distorted.

"Maybe this happened because it's Rudy. His reputation at the academy isn't good."

When Luna said this, Ena smiled.

"If Luna says so, it must be true."

"No… It could be wrong! Yeah… maybe Rudy just made a mistake!"

Luna, feeling she had said too much, mumbled and sat down.

Ena smiled at her and started talking.

"Anyway, Luna, you seem so busy lately."

"Busy? Do I?"

"You seem to have dark circles under your eyes, and you're not hanging out or going for walks with friends as much."

"Do… do I? I thought I was just living my life as usual."

Luna stuttered, seeming flustered.

Ena looked at her and chuckled.

"Studying is good, but don't forget to take breaks."

"Yeah… I'll do that."

Lately, Luna had been spending her days with Rudy at the library.

Of course, they were just studying there.

Luna didn't stop at the library; she continued studying late into the night.

Anticipation.

Rudy had said he was looking forward to her growth.

Luna didn't want to disappoint his expectations.

She wanted to show Rudy her impressive progress as soon as possible.

"Hehe…"

Luna imagined Rudy admiring her achievements and let out a silly smile.

"Oh, by the way, I heard that Locke and Rudy Astria will be campaigning in front of

the first-year dormitory tomorrow."

"Campaigning?"

Luna tilted her head at Ena's words.

"Yeah, I just heard it, so it must be true. They're doing it in the morning."

"Hmm."

Luna thought for a moment and then smiled.

* * *

The next day.

Today, Red Head had said he would go to the student council and confess.

He was going to claim it wasn't something I had ordered, but rather something he had done on his own.

However, another problem had arisen.

"Sigh."

Right now, Locke and I were standing in front of the dormitory.

In my hand, I held a banner with Astina's name and promises written on it.

Over the weekend, Astina had negotiated that Locke and I would campaign for her in front of the dormitory.

I couldn't understand why it had come to this.

Locke, who seemed irritated by merely standing next to me, was also annoying.

Students passing by would look at me and whisper.

It was clear that my presence was detrimental to Astina.

Why had nobody stopped me?

Wasn't it obvious that Astina's reputation was being damaged right now?

A deep sigh welled up from within me.

A considerable amount of time had passed, and it was almost time to attend classes.

As I tried to pack up and leave, Locke called out to me.

"Hey, you."

"What is it?"

There was a murderous intent in his eyes.

However, it was significantly calmer than his usual aggressive demeanor.

"Why did you order him to harass Evan?"

I ignored his question and casually picked up my things, heading toward the building.

The truth would be revealed today anyway.

Wouldn't it be more strange if I were to say that I was falsely accused and that Red Head would confess today?

As I tried to leave, Locke grabbed my arm.

"What do you think you're doing?"

"Answer my question, Rudy Astria."

Why is he acting like this?

"I didn't do it. How many times do I have to say it?"

I shook off Locke's hand and walked forward.

Then, Locke spat out a curse.

"Filthy bastard."

I ignored Locke's cursing and kept walking.

"Why do you take out your inferiority complex toward your brother on others? Do you think that's something a high-ranking noble should do?"

Why is he creating an embarrassing moment for himself?

After cursing like that, it would be embarrassing for him when it's revealed I wasn't the one responsible.

I tried to ignore Locke and leave.

However, I saw someone coming down the stairs and speaking.

"What did you say?"

"Luna?"

Descending the stairs was Luna.

"What are you doing?"

Luna's usual gentle face was gone.

Her eyes, filled with murderous intent, stared at Locke.

"Luna Railer?"

Locke seemed slightly taken aback by Luna's expression.

However, Luna didn't respond to him and asked again.

"What are you doing? Why are you cursing at someone who's minding their own business?"

Locke furrowed his brow.

Seeing Locke's reaction, Luna seemed to get even angrier and spoke with murderous intent.

"Are you not going to answer?"

"I cursed him because he did something deserving of it."

Locke spoke calmly.

Wind began to gather in Luna's hand.

"So, it's okay for me to attack you did something deserving of it, right?"

The beginner wind attribute magic, Wind Ball.

However, its size seemed strange.

I knew Luna's magic level wasn't that high, but the size was similar to my own magic.

No, now wasn't the time to worry about that.

If we started fighting seriously, none of us would come out unscathed.

Luna, Locke, and I.

There was no need to fight like this.

I stood up and grabbed Luna's arm.

"Luna, it's okay."

"Rudy?"

I looked at Locke.

"You too, scram."

"What?"

"Leave while I'm letting you off."

Locke glanced at Luna and then went inside the building.

"Rudy! Is it okay to let him go like that?"

Luna looked at me, worried.

"Don't worry, it's fine. We can't just start casting magic over a few insults."

Luna's magic dissipated, and her face turned red.

"It was just… I got angry all of a sudden."

Luna seemed to have had enough, venting her anger at me.

"Besides, why didn't you say anything? You should have at least argued back!"

"Why bother with someone who won't believe a word I say?"

"You still should have said something!"

"Anyway, class is about to start."

As I tried to leave with a faint smile, Luna grabbed my sleeve.

"Are you really okay?"

"I'm fine. But why did you only come out of the dormitory now?"

To ease Luna's worry, I changed the subject.

But it was strange.

As I mentioned earlier, class would start soon.

Luna usually wasn't late.

"Ah… Today, my hair just wouldn't cooperate! I overslept a bit too. That's why I'm late!"

Luna stuttered slightly.

However, her hair looked just as it usually did.

No, it seemed even neater than usual.

Well, if Luna said so, it must be true.

I trusted Luna completely and let it go.

I walked into the building with Luna.

And we parted ways midway since we had different classes.

"Ah…"

I suddenly remembered, I had forgotten to ask about Luna's magic.

It seemed to have grown much faster than her usual pace.

The fact bothered me, but I thought it could happen.

My actions were completely different from the original work; how could every little detail be the same as in the game?

"It's probably nothing."

CHAPTER 14
STUDENT COUNCIL PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION (5)

At Princess Rie's quarters, Locke stood before her meekly.

"So, why did you do that?"

Rie glared at Locke, and the atmosphere was tense.

"I apologize."

"Did I tell you to pick a fight with Rudy Astria or to keep an eye on him? With such baseless rumors? Do you plan to make enemies of both Rudy Astria and me?"

“…I apologize."

"Wind Cutter."

As Rie chanted the spell, a lock of Locke's hair was cut off.

A wound appeared on his forehead, and blood trickled down.

"I really dislike it when my plans go awry."

Locke looked at his hair that had fallen to the floor.

"Next time, it'll be your arm. Then, it'll be your territory, and after that, it'll be your neck."

Rie irritably brushed her hair aside.

"Be careful not to cause any harm to the upcoming alliance."

"I understand."

Rie smiled at the bowing Locke.

"Great~ If you do that, everything will be fine. Do your best, okay?"

Locke left Rie's room.

He had been too foolish.

He should have been more cautious and deliberate in his actions.

He should have realized that this place was not his territory, but Liberion Academy.

The day he hurled insults at Rudy Astria, Baron William's son went to the student council and confessed.

Upon hearing the news, his head went blank.

Rudy Astria.

That person was an 'evil character' in his mind.

Someone who looked down on those beneath him, acting arrogant without knowing their own limits.

He was convinced that Rudy Astria was such a person.

However, he wasn't.

Yes, he had been too foolish.

He was clumsy when it came to using his head. Even with great strength, it held no meaning. He felt it was both his own and his family's limitation.

The family guarding the cold northern region was a family with strong power in such a harsh environment. Locke's family, the Lucarion family, was one of them. While they possessed great strength, they were not particularly gifted intellectually. They excelled in battle strategy but were ignorant in other areas, such as politics.

In a peaceful era,

those with power felt limited.

No matter how skilled in combat, if there was no battle, their abilities were useless.

The Empire's center attracted those skilled in magic and politics.

And they found themselves pushed to the periphery.

Physically and politically on the outskirts, they began to feel threatened.

Thus, Locke made a resolution when he arrived at the academy.

To learn politics.

To get close to the best political minds and learn from them.

And to expand his connections.

So, the person Locke approached was the First Princess, Rie.

A potential future empress.

There was no reason not to get close to her.

"Rudy Astria…"

Until Princess Rie mentioned it, Locke knew nothing.

Rudy Astria seemed like nothing more than a wayward second son.

As someone living in the north, he knew that Rudy Astria was famous.

However, both Princess Rie and Astina Persia paid attention to Rudy Astria.

Ordinary people pointed fingers at him, but the academy's top students sought to get closer to him.

Upon hearing the news that Baron William's offspring had surrendered, he realized the truth.

He was foolish, not seeing the reality.

Now he could understand.

Rudy Astria was not just a wayward young man.

Those with foresight had already noticed.

Locke casually wiped the blood flowing from his forehead with his sleeve.

Having seen numerous situations in the north, such a wound was nothing to him.

The fact he had made a mistake was more painful than the wound itself.

"I need to study more."

* * *

The red-haired guy confessed as I had instructed him to.

He admitted his guilt without mentioning Garwel.

I deliberately told him to not bring up Garwel since there was no benefit to provoking him already.

When the incident properly explodes during the midterm event , we can uproot the entire thing.

There was no need to touch upon it just yet.

When I told the red-haired guy not to mention Garwel, he repeatedly bowed his head in gratitude.

It was a little awkward since I did it for my own benefit, but he seemed so grateful.

A few days later.

"Shall we have a listen then?"

As soon as the class ended, Astina approached me.

She took me to an empty classroom.

She sat on a chair, crossed her legs, and spoke to me.

"What are you talking about?"

"Everything from your actions at home to your fight with Baron William's son."

She seemed to know it all.

"Shall we listen slowly?"

Did she mean the rumors of my idiocy at home?

I could understand the stories about home, but how did she know about the fight with the red-haired guy?

I was sure I used a silent spell, and no one was around.

"How did you know about the fight with the son of Baron William?"

However, Astina deflected my question with a question.

"Which parts of the stories spreading from your family are true?"

As I didn't answer and calmly stood there, Astina smiled.

Then she opened her mouth.

"What are you? Rudy Astria?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

I showed no reaction and kept looking at Astina.

"The rumors are bad, but you're not really doing anything wrong."

Astina looked at me as she sat and said.

She took out some documents from the book she had been holding.

"In the family, you're a troublemaker. A second son who relies only on his talent. But looking at you in the academy, you appear to be nothing but an ordinary model student. To the point where it's hard to understand how such rumors were created."

It was a natural discrepancy since it wasn't me at home.

I had expected such a situation, but it happened faster than I thought.

"Even when Locke picks a fight, you simply try to pass by harmlessly."

She flipped through the documents in her hand one by one.

"If you cover up the name, you'd just be a kind student."

Astina looked at me and smiled faintly.

Then she put down the documents she had been holding.

"I can help you."

"Pardon?"

"I don't know why you're acting like this, but I can help you."

Astina reached out her hand to me.

"I've established my position in the academy now. There are powerful professors and children from prestigious families, but I have the power to counter them. If I take the student council president's position soon, my power will grow even stronger."

"…"

"I'll help you. Tell me your goal, and I'll help you. In return, you help me. Not as my subordinate, but as an equal partner."

Astina pushed her hand toward me as if urging me to hold it.

"Let's cooperate, Rudy Astria."

"Aren't we already cooperating as part of the student council?"

"I mean a proper alliance, not that. The student council is just temporary."

Hearing those words, I pondered for a moment.

Then, I opened my mouth.

"What do you see in me that makes you propose such a thing?"

I asked Astina.

Astina responded with a smile.

"It's just a hunch."

"Making decisions without solid evidence isn't wise."

"True for ordinary actions, but recognizing talent is different. It would be a shame to miss out on talent right in front of me."

The words he had said to Luna.

She knew everything others would never know.

She knew so much but I couldn't fathom how she found out.

"But you are strong enough without my help. If you take the student council president position, as you said, you will have even greater influence. Why make such an offer to me?"

"Hmm… That's my secret. I'll tell you if you ally with me."

I was torn.

Would joining hands with Astina be better?

Or would it be better to continue acting alone?

I weighed the two options.

Joining hands with Astina would be helpful not only within the academy but also

outside.

She's a child of a prestigious family, after all.

Surviving in the academy was one problem, but so was life after graduation.

Let's skip thinking about that for now, as it's a distant concern.

However, even considering the academy alone, Astina undoubtedly had the most influence.

She was set to claim the student council president position and already held the top rank among second-year students.

Her power would definitely help me.

Just by listening to our conversation, didn't she know everything I had hidden?

There were clear advantages to joining hands with her.

The only downside of joining hands with her was dealing with unexpected developments.

While progressing the main story, I'd also have to deal with matters related to Astina.

I'd be extremely busy.

And explaining my intentions would be difficult.

No one would believe me if I said I was a person who entered the game and had to help Evan grow to prevent everyone at the academy from dying.

I struggled between the two choices.

And soon, I made a decision.

"How about a temporary alliance?"

"Temporary alliance?"

"I won't reveal everything about me. I'll only tell you what I intend to do to some extent. You can also weigh the pros and cons when helping me. If you help me, I'll provide corresponding help in return."

Hearing this, Astina smirked.

"Fine. I can accept that much."

Astina extended her hand to me, and I took it.

"Then let's hear it. Your intentions and your goals."

After a brief moment of thought, I spoke.

"I will become the academy's second seat."

“…Second seat?"

"The wall one must overcome to secure the top position in the academy. That's the role I'll play."

Of course, the person who would surpass that wall was already determined.

"Why won't you take the top seat yourself?"

"Because responsibility comes with the position."

In the main stories Evan experiences, there are events that occur because he's the top student.

Although those stories would grant him powerful weapons or abilities, the risks are too high.

Only someone with Evan's mental fortitude and skills could overcome them.

There are stories that require special magic that only Evan can use, and there are stories where he must persevere through sheer willpower.

I knew all too well how difficult those stories were.

Even knowing every story, they're still hard to overcome.

I didn't have the confidence to take on that responsibility.

"What do you know?"

At my words, Astina's face filled with curiosity.

However, I couldn't tell her everything.

There was no guarantee that the things I mentioned would happen, and other events could occur that I didn't mention.

I only knew the predetermined stories, not the ability to read the future.

"I don't know for sure."

"Then what are you basing this on?"

"Just a hunch."

As I said that, Astina's serious expression relaxed, and she spoke.

"You tell me not to rely on my instincts, yet you do trust in yours. Isn't that contradictory?"

"We can't rely entirely on intuition. But there is some evidence behind my words."

"What's the evidence?"

"That's a secret."

With that, Astina casually organized the documents she was holding and stood up.

"So, your goal is to become the second-seat, right?"

"Yes, that's correct."

"I'm curious who could beat you with all that effort."

I asked Astina a question in response to her words.

"Now, it's your turn, Senior Astina. Why do you need me?"

At my question, Astina raised the corner of her mouth.

"I will beat my brother, Varian Persia."

I had never heard the name Varian Persia before.

But I could understand the meaning behind her words.

"Are you trying to take the position of family successor?"

Astina didn't answer my question and just smiled.

It was a more complicated issue than I thought.

"Is it possible?"

"I am more thoroughly prepared than you think. I must succeed since I'm betting my life on it."

"What if I betray you?"

"I would blame myself for misjudging you and die, I suppose."

Although her words were harsh, she said them playfully.

Her words were convincing.

I understood she wanted to take over the family, but I wondered if I really needed to be involved.

I was just a discarded child from a duke's family, unable to rely on the power of my family.

Astina would know that too.

So what she needed was not the power of the Astria family, but the power of the top

student, Rudy Astria.

In that case, she probably wouldn't ask me to do anything too burdensome.

After we finished talking, Astina walked towards the door.

"Are you leaving?"

"Yeah, the election is soon. I'm busy, so I have to go."

Astina waved her hand to me and opened the door.

"See you next time, partner."

* * *

And so, the election day arrived.

As expected, Astina secured a comfortable victory.

"How did I end up in this position?"

Astina leaned back in her chair, now seated at the student council president's desk.

"Wasn't this the anticipated result?"

A woman sipping tea in front of her replied.

It was Princess Rie.

"Even so, it feels great."

Astina smiled at Rie.

"Now that I'm the student council president, it's time to start working on our families."

Astina handed some documents to the princess.

"I've gathered this much information, and I've already begun laying the

groundwork."

Rie skimmed through the documents and grinned.

"Sounds good~ I'll start working on the central region as well."

"Since I've fulfilled my promise to become the student council president, sign the contract."

Rie accepted the contract Astina handed her.

It stated the following:

1. Rie Von Ristonia will assist Astina Persia in inheriting the title of viscount.

2. Upon successfully inheriting the title, Astina Persia will help Rie Von Ristonia become the Empress… and so on.

Several clauses were written, and both of them signed the contract.

"I never thought we'd be in the same boat, given our opposing situations. I thought you'd dislike me."

"Opposing situations make it easier for us to understand each other, right?"

It was a collaboration between someone trying to steal power from her superior and someone trying to prevent losing their power.

Astina wanted to surpass her brother and become the family's heir, while Rie strived to prevent her sister from taking her power.

Despite their contrasting situations, they understood and acknowledged each other.

"Then I'm counting on you~."

Rie put down her teacup and rose from her seat.

"Ah."

As she was about to open the door, Rie glanced back.

"By the way, did the information about Rudy Astria help?"

"It did help. I'm grateful for that."

Rie smiled.

"I was a little interested in him as well, so it was a nice gesture~. So, what happened?"

"Don't you know?"

"Hey~ I can't always listen to everything~."

Rie spoke playfully.

"We've agreed to cooperate, and I've learned his intentions to some extent. He's not an enemy."

"Oh~ really? If our president says so~."

Astina didn't particularly like Rie's playful tone.

However, it was appropriate for their cooperative relationship, so she didn't feel too bothered.

"Well, I'll be going now. Astina-senior?"

"Alright."

Rie opened the door and left.

"Sigh…"

Astina let out a sigh and loosened her scarf a little.

"But now it's time for midterms…"

She had neglected her studies while preparing for the election.

Even if she had secured the student council president position, it would be useless if

she lost her top rank.

Astina took out her book and opened it.

"I won't be getting much sleep for a while."

Though she said this, Astina wore a smile.

CHAPTER 15
THE BURNING LIBRARY (1)

The day had come.

The day I was most worried about.

It was midterm exam day.

Liberion Academy didn't hold exams over several days; instead, all tests were taken in a single day.

So, I had to give it my all in one day.

"Rudy, good luck on your exams!"

Luna greeted me before heading to her own exam room.

We had worked hard up until this point.

Not a single day was wasted; we thoroughly reviewed and prepared.

Since taking over, I hadn't had a proper rest day.

It was all about studying.

Sigh…

I calmed my nerves and entered the classroom.

I was supposed to aim for the second seat.

But I had no intention of settling for that.

My mind was set on the top seat.

That was the only way I could secure the second seat.

"Please put away your books and notes, and only leave your writing utensils on your desk."

The professor at the front of the room explained the exam instructions and distributed the test papers.

"Now, let the exam begin."

The exam started with the professor's words.

I began answering the questions on the test paper one by one.

It was a new experience for me.

I knew the answers to all the questions on the test.

It felt almost too easy.

I flipped through the pages and solved each problem.

I finished all the general knowledge exams.

After a short break, the most important exam began: Magic Studies.

The Magic Studies exam was lengthy, consisting of both practical and theoretical questions.

Each professor set questions according to their own style.

The most challenging questions when I was studying even with answer sheets were undoubtedly those from Professor Cromwell.

Despite being a first-year exam, the questions required knowledge of intermediate magic and were impossible to solve.

It felt like they were designed not to be answered.

I remembered this fact as I tackled the questions.

Then, I found a question that was unmistakably from Professor Cromwell.

"Ah…"

Describe the principle of Silent Magic and the characteristics of its magic circle.

He was the only professor who ended his question with a noun.

However, the question made my head throb.

"Did he put this question for me to answer…?"

I muttered quietly, so no one could hear.

I wondered if it was even allowed.

A regular student wouldn't be able to answer the question about Silent Magic.

Everyone focused on studying beginner magic, not intermediate magic.

I held my head in my hands.

Should I answer this question or not?

An ordinary first-year student couldn't answer it, but the top-ranking students might be able to.

The difficulty level of the questions this year was easier compared to other years.

Silent Magic was a peculiar magic, and someone might have heard about it at least once.

So, I couldn't leave it blank.

"Let's write… just half of it."

I decided to write only what Professor Cromwell had taught me.

Honestly, I could write everything since I had created the magic circle before, but I chose to write only what I had been taught.

"Please… Evan, write everything and turn it in."

I muttered to myself and moved on to the next question.

* * *

"Great job, everyone."

Exams have finally ended.

At the professor's words, everyone stood up and left the classroom.

'Am I going to be the top student?'

Mixed feelings of anxiety and joy filled me.

At least my efforts didn't seem to be in vain.

"Let's rest today…"

I felt utterly drained.

I had been so tense, thinking I had to study every day, that I hadn't taken a break.

But after the exam, I felt a sense of relief, as if it was finally over.

It wasn't truly over, but it felt like I had passed the first hurdle.

My legs trembled, making it difficult to even stand.

"Rudy! How did your exam go?"

As I stood up, Luna entered the classroom I had just left.

"I think it went alright."

I thought I had done exceptionally well, but there was no need to boast.

"Today, Riku, Ena, and I are going to Picassie Bakery. Want to come with us?"

Picassie Bakery was a famous café in Liberion Academy.

It was a place where commoners and lower nobles would splurge, rather than the high-ranking nobles.

The prices weren't exactly affordable, but I had heard the atmosphere and desserts were outstanding.

It was so popular that making reservations was difficult, but they managed to book a table.

"I'm planning to rest today."

I wanted to visit the bakery, but it wouldn't be right to tag along with them.

I didn't know about Ena, but Riku would surely give me a resentful look.

And I wasn't so clueless as to impose on a group of girls.

Luna might not mind, but the other two would certainly be uncomfortable with my presence.

"Really? That's a shame… Let's go together next time!"

"Sure. Have fun."

Dragging my exhausted body, I headed for the dormitory.

There wasn't a single person near the dorms; it seemed everyone had gone somewhere to have fun after the exam.

However, there was one person, just like me, dragging themselves along like a zombie.

"Rudy Astria?"

It was Astina.

She had dark circles under her eyes, and her hair looked disheveled.

Her face seemed to be weighed down by exhaustion, like a modern-day office worker leaving work at 10 PM.

Yet, her fatigue didn't diminish her beauty. If anything, it gave her a decadent charm.

"Greetings—"

"Don't… don't look at me!"

Astina abruptly turned her back to me. She tried to fix her hair with her hands, but it only seemed to get messier.

“…What are you doing?"

"Well…”

Astina covered her face with her hand and looked at me.

"I have urgent matters to attend to!"

After briefly greeting me, Astina tried to rush to the dormitory.

She then halted her steps.

"Rudy Astria! I have something for you to do tomorrow. Come to the student council room after class!"

With her face still covered, Astina spoke to me and then rushed up to the dormitory.

“…What was that?"

I watched Astina run off before heading to my room.

* * *

The next day, the exam results were posted on the bulletin board.

I couldn't believe they had graded all those test papers in just one day.

I could only imagine the amount of work the teaching assistants had to do.

Even in the modern era, where machines graded exams, it took several days for the results to be posted.

Teaching assistants must be more efficient than machines.

I checked the scores on the bulletin board.

It didn't display the exact scores, only the ranks.

"Ah…”

Evan Rudy Astria Rie Von Ristonia Serina Rinsburg Luna Railer

…

Seeing the results, I couldn't help but smile.

I was happy Evan had secured the top rank, but I was even more thrilled to be in second place.

However, I couldn't show my excitement in front of others.

I had to act as if I were extremely disappointed.

After all, I was now in second place, having been ousted from the top spot.

I did my best to control my smile as I walked away.

"Rudy…”

Luna's voice came from behind me.

"Ah, hello, Luna."

I greeted Luna while trying my best to control my smile.

My words sounded a bit mechanical, but I couldn't help it.

"Rudy… are you okay?"

Luna asked with a concerned expression.

I was more than okay; I was in high spirits.

I trusted Luna, but I couldn't tell her the truth.

"You've climbed the ranks quite a bit. Congratulations."

I said something I wouldn't normally say, but nothing else came to mind.

"Rudy…"

"I have to go."

"Wait, Rudy. Are you coming to the library today?"

"I don't think I can make it today. I have work with the student council."

Astina had told me there was something I needed to do, so I doubted I'd have time to visit the library.

It was better to tell Luna not to wait for me since I didn't know what Astina had planned.

"Ah… the student council…"

Luna's expression briefly hardened but soon returned to her usual smile.

"Alright, I understand…!"

Luna smiled and waved goodbye. As I watched her walk away, I couldn't shake an odd feeling of unease.

"Maybe I'll visit the library if I finish early?"

After class, I headed to the student council office.

I thought I had managed my smile quite well during the lessons.

Upon entering the office, I saw Astina sitting in the president's seat, reading through

some documents.

"Good day."

Astina looked up when she heard my voice. She glanced at my face and frowned.

"Why are you making that face?"

"Huh?"

"You seem to have a sour expression."

"Do I look upset?"

I wondered if I had done a good job at acting.

Astina held a mirror in front of me, reflecting my face.

Upon seeing my reflection, I understood what Astina meant.

In the mirror, there was an incredibly handsome, blonde man.

A man with sharp eyes.

However, he wore an ambiguous expression, neither smiling nor frowning, that seemed to keep others at bay.

"It's quite unpleasant, even for me."

"I know."

Astina put the mirror down.

"Anyway, everything went according to your plan."

Hearing Astina say that, I couldn't help but smirk.

"Hehe…"

I had always thought I was good at controlling my expressions and acting, but today

it was difficult to contain myself.

"That's a rather despicable expression…"

Astina commented while looking at my face.

"Well, at least it's better than the alternative. So, what's next?"

"What's next…?"

"Your plan worked, didn't it? Someone else took the top seat."

That was true.

"There's nothing else to do. We just have to wait until after midterm camp."

"After midterm camp?"

Astina looked at me with a puzzled expression.

"Well, if there's nothing for you to do, I guess I won't be of any help either. Let's get back to work."

"Understood."

Astina handed me some documents, and I began to process the tasks she assigned.

After finishing a fair amount of work, I stepped outside with a light gait.

"Is it too late?"

It was already time for dinner.

"I should stop by the dormitory briefly and then have dinner with Luna."

Feeling delighted, I walked on.

By now, most of my worries had vanished.

Luna hadn't destroyed the library, and I had secured second place without any

issues.

My magic was growing steadily, so there wasn't much to be concerned about.

After stepping outside, I looked up at the sky.

"Why is the weather like this?"

Though my mood was good, the sky was filled with dark clouds.

A heavy feeling washed over me.

Despite things going smoothly, I couldn't shake off an uneasy feeling.

As that unease lingered…

Kwa-aaaaaang!!!

A powerful explosion resounded throughout the Academy.

"What…?"

I looked in the direction of the sound.

The source of the noise was… the library.

"The library… Luna…?"

CHAPTER 16
THE BURNING LIBRARY (2)

On the day the exam results were announced, after class had ended, Luna walked to the library alone.

Before joining the student council, she and Rudy had gone to the library together almost every day.

Now that they were apart, the empty space felt more pronounced.

"Rudy… Is he alright?"

Rudy hadn't managed to secure the top spot this time.

Luna knew him as a friend who was entirely focused on his studies, never shifting his attention elsewhere.

He must have wanted the top seat badly.

"His expression wasn't good."

Rudy usually didn't have much variation in his facial expressions.

However, today was different.

His usually sharp gaze seemed slightly blurred, and the corners of his mouth twitched.

It was a complicated expression, difficult to describe.

He was undoubtedly upset.

On the other hand, Luna's grades had improved significantly.

She had achieved good results, studying daily with Rudy.

Although she was happy about her improvement, she felt guilty.

Rudy had been supporting her tuition fees and giving her an allowance, in exchange for her research.

Yet, she hadn't been of any help.

“…You idiot! What's the point of just studying?!"

Luna roughly ruffled her hair.

She had conducted other research while preparing for exams, but she hadn't achieved any significant results.

She hadn't even managed to create the magic circle Rudy had requested.

Instead, Rudy had asked Professor Cromwell questions and provided her with various pieces of information, which helped her greatly.

"Ah…”

Professor Mcguire had given her a deadline, but Rudy hadn't.

It was because he trusted her.

He believed in her potential.

She didn't want to betray that trust.

There wasn't much Luna could do for Rudy now.

She didn't think any words from her would comfort him.

The only thing she could do was show him the results of her research.

To distract him from his thoughts by presenting him with fascinating research.

She believed that was the best way she could comfort him.

Now that midterms were over, she had plenty of time.

Riku and Ena had invited her to a restaurant near the Academy tomorrow.

But she wouldn't go anywhere unless she produced research results!

Luna made a firm resolution.

Midterms were over, and classes had ended early, so she had plenty of time for research.

"I'll… focus on my research!!"

* * *

A little later…

"Ugh…"

Luna lay sprawled across the library desk.

Beside her were stacks of books and papers.

They were evidence of her efforts.

"Is this not it either…"

Luna flipped through the research papers.

"Sigh… Should I start from the beginning again…"

Luna began skimming through the books once more.

She had already discarded three or four research projects.

Some of the research was beyond her abilities, while others were fundamentally flawed.

"Now, I don't even know where to begin…"

She had already read the beginner magic books several times.

However, these fields had already been thoroughly researched, and Luna couldn't see any room for further study.

So, she focused on intermediate magic circles.

Even someone who could only use basic magic could cast more advanced spells with a well-drawn magic circle and scrolls.

But it was much more difficult.

"There are no more books to read…"

The library had countless books, but the number of books related to her specialities and level of understanding was limited.

That's when Luna's eyes fell on the grimoire given to her by her benefactor.

"…Can I understand it now?"

When she first saw it, she had no idea what the contents were about.

However, a lot has changed since then.

She could now slowly read the magic circles related to intermediate magic.

-Open the grimoire when you can handle it properly.

Suddenly, she recalled the letter from the person who gave her the grimoire.

But she still didn't understand the meaning of those words.

When she first read those words, she was scared.

She thought something strange might happen if she opened the grimoire.

One day, out of curiosity, she couldn't resist opening it.

But nothing happened.

She just couldn't understand the contents.

Luna took out the grimoire after a long time.

For a moment, she stared at the cover and pondered.

"What's the harm?"

Luna opened the grimoire.

She started flipping through the pages, scanning them one by one.

She could understand some of the contents, but most of it was still unknown to her.

"Ugh…"

There were even parts she couldn't read at all.

"It's difficult…"

As she continued flipping through, Luna came across an eye-catching magic circle.

"…A square."

It was a square magic circle, just like the one she first drew.

"Did I come up with that magic circle after seeing this…?"

She never knew there was such a magic circle in the grimoire before.

But looking at the magic circle, she felt disappointed.

Rudy had praised her for coming up with a brilliant idea, but it wasn't that brilliant after all.

Perhaps the magic circle she saw as a child unconsciously remained in her mind, allowing her to create it.

"Was it just… good luck…?"

Luna stroked the square magic circle with her hand.

It was undoubtedly the same square magic circle, but she couldn't read it at all.

A high-level magic circle.

If only I could use such a magic circle…

Wouldn't it help Rudy too?

"Huh…?"

As she had that thought, the magic circle began to emit a bright light.

"What's this…?"

Luna's mana drained from her body.

-Crackling…!

"Ah…"

As the spark burst, her vision blurred.

-Kwaaaaaang!!!

Then, strong winds and flames erupted from Luna's body.

* * *

"Luna…!"

Flames erupted from the library.

They didn't seem to have spread outside.

I rushed straight to the library.

It had to be Luna.

She had said she would study in the library today.

But something was off.

The scale of the flames wasn't what I had seen in the game.

Had the incident been delayed?

Come to think of it, the magic I saw last time was strange too.

When I tried to use magic on Locke, it seemed more powerful than I expected.

I was able to use magic at a level similar to his.

Of course, I didn't delve deep into a single attribute, so the power of each spell was weaker.

Even so, I was still among the stronger students.

"Luna's level in magic must be higher higher than in the game."

This wasn't good.

Luna had been able to avoid punishment in the game because the situation was small.

Though there were many books in the library, protection magic had prevented any damage, and the incident had occurred late at night without casualties.

There had been no significant damage, so she could avoid punishment.

But now, the situation was serious.

As I approached, many people were watching the scene in front of the library.

The student council members were preventing people from getting too close, and a familiar face was at the forefront.

"Astina, senior."

Astina turned around upon hearing my voice.

She had arrived before me, despite being further away.

It seemed like she had used magic to get here.

"Rudy"

Astina looked back at the library.

"The fire isn't too strong. It doesn't seem like the library itself is burning."

Astina roughly explained the situation.

She was right.

Luna's mana wouldn't be enough to burn down the entire library.

The protected library couldn't burn that easily.

Astina began to move her mana.

"I'll put out the fire."

As Astina reached out to use magic, I grabbed her wrist.

"You can't."

"What?"

Astina looked at me, her expression full of confusion.

-Thud!

"Look! Someone's coming out!"

Hearing someone's shout, I turned my gaze to the library door.

As the door opened, someone stumbled out.

"Ugh…"

Astina and I rushed over to the person.

Upon seeing their face, it was the librarian in charge of the library.

"Are you alright?"

I asked, and they gave a slight nod.

"Is there anyone else inside?"

"I… I was the only librarian… But… Luna, the student…"

"Luna? Luna Railer?"

Astina asked the librarian, who nodded.

"Yes… I saw that student studying earlier, but I haven't seen her since…"

"Oh, if it's Luna, she's fine. She was with me just a moment ago."

"What?"

Astina and the librarian looked at me.

"Ah… you're the friend who's always with Luna… In that case, there's no one left inside the library."

The librarian sighed in relief.

However, Astina wasn't convinced and stared at me intently.

"One of the student council members! Please take this person to the infirmary."

"Yes!"

Upon my shout, someone came and escorted the librarian away.

"Rudy Astria, didn't you show up just now?"

Astina asked me with a face full of suspicion.

I told her the truth.

"Luna is inside."

We started conversing in hushed tones, so no one around could hear.

"But why did you say she was somewhere else?"

"Luna started the fire."

"What? The fire? Luna Railer can only use beginner-level magic, right?"

Astina looked at the flames consuming the library.

It wasn't a fire that Luna could have caused.

However, there was a possible explanation.

"It's a mana explosion. It happened due to mental corruption from dark magic."

A mana explosion is a common symptom when using dark magic improperly.

All the mana within the body is expelled outward.

However, pure mana cannot be expelled, so all the spells the body can use are cast haphazardly.

And since she loses consciousness in the process, she can't control the magic that surges out of their body.

"How do you know this?"

Astina looked at me incredulously.

"I'll explain everything later. For now, we can't extinguish the fire immediately. If we do, the student council will enter the library to assess the situation, and we won't be able to save Luna."

"You're worried about Luna Railer being punished?"

"That's part of it, and there are other complications as well."

If such a fire occurred, they would thoroughly investigate the interior, and traces of Luna causing the incident would be left behind.

Those traces needed to be erased.

There were several other reasons, but explaining them now would only waste time.

It was crucial to act quickly.

"I'll go inside."

"What?"

Astina frowned at my words.

"What are you going to do by going in? It's better if I go."

"No. Astina, you just need to make sure no one enters. It's dangerous for a student to put out the fire, so we'll wait for the faculty to arrive."

Honestly, no student other than Astina could put out this fire.

Third-year students usually spend their first semester interning elsewhere.

So, there was no one at the academy capable of extinguishing this fire now.

Professors and teaching assistants were likely out celebrating since exams had ended.

Waiting for them would buy enough time.

"Can't we use your title as the student council president to make it happen?"

"It might be possible to stall until the faculty arrives, but you're the problem. Even if you're exceptional, isn't it difficult to handle a mana explosion?"

Astina was right.

But I had to do it.

"I'll give it a try."

If I run out of time, it's a failure.

If I fail, Luna's spellbook will be confiscated, and she'll be punished.

Considering the current situation, it wouldn't be a minor punishment.

A severe penalty, like suspension, was possible.

The spellbook was important, but I didn't want Luna to suffer such punishment.

Luna was my first friend since coming to this place.

She had been friendly to me even when everyone else pointed fingers and insulted me.

I didn't want her to suffer.

With that thought in mind, I made up my mind.

It was better to try than to waste time here pondering.

"I'll go in right away."

"Eh~ Where are you going by yourself?"

Rie appeared through the gap between the disciplinary committee members that had formed a blockade.

They tried to stop her, but Locke, who was behind Rie, stopped them.

"I'm from the student council. She is as well."

Upon hearing Locke's words, the committee members looked to Astina for confirmation.

"That's right. You don't have to stop them."

With Astina's permission, they let Rie and Locke pass.

"Can you do it by yourself~?"

I wondered what Rie was talking about.

We had only whispered our conversation and hadn't shown any actions.

Seeing my puzzled expression, Astina spoke up.

"She probably knows our conversation, so it's fine."

“…What?"

I was confused.

"Rie can handle both wind elementals and wind attribute magic, so she can hear almost any sound even from a distance."

She could hear… our entire conversation?

This ability wasn't mentioned in the game.

I knew she had a special ability to handle both magic and elementals, but I didn't know she could use it like this.

"I knew about all your actions because she told me."

"Princess Rie… informed you?"

What's the relationship between Princess Rie and Astina?

I felt a bit overwhelmed, but I quickly regained my composure.

I don't have time for this.

"So, Princess Rie, you're going to help me?"

"Yes~ I'll help you. You mean going in there, right? Where Locke is… huh?"

I grabbed Rie's wrist while she was speaking and headed toward the library.

There was no time for idle chatter.

Still, it was fortunate that Rie was willing to help.

"Wait? No, no. I'll help, but Locke is the one who should go in—."

"Quiet. Follow me quickly."

Since I was in a hurry, I dragged Rie along and briskly walked toward the library.

"No. Listen to my conditions first……”

"Tell me whatever you want."

"Well, first of all, stop using formal speech……”

As Princess Rie was being dragged by me, she continued to speak.

"Fine, I'll speak casually. Hurry up. We're running out of time. I'll listen to your conditions once everything's done."

As I kept ignoring her words and pulling her along, Rie dropped her cheeky attitude.

"Hey! I'm not going in there, okay? I'm a princess! What if I get hurt going in there?!"

Rie complained with annoyance.

"I won't make you do anything dangerous. Just follow me quickly. I need your help, not his."

"Lo, Locke!!! Locke!! Stop him!"

As I continued to pull her without hesitation, Rie stuttered and searched for Locke.

Locke then approached me.

I looked at Locke and said,

"Hey, you've wronged me before, haven't you?"

It was the time when he had insulted me.

Locke stopped in his tracks.

"I haven't received an apology for that yet. I won't make a fuss about it, so just stay put. It would be even better if you could prevent others from entering here."

Locke's expression tightened.

He was that kind of guy.

Since he made a mistake with me, he would at least do one favor for me, no matter what Rie says.

“…Understood."

"Wha, what, what? Hey! Follow my order! Hey!"

"I apologize."

Locke bowed 90 degrees to Rie.

"Hey!!!!!!!!!!"

"He won't be of any help if he goes in there. Just follow me obediently."

With that, I took the screaming Rie into the library.

CHAPTER 17
THE BURNING LIBRARY (3)

"There's no use in bringing him along. Just follow me."

"Consider it your duty to protect me at all costs. I'm going to be the Empress one day."

"Don't worry. Neither of us will die here."

Rie, in contrast to her usual cunning attitude, raised her voice in anger, revealing her true nature.

That's right; this is how she should be.

I found this attitude more comfortable.

Her typical behavior might be more appealing to the nobility, but for me, who knew about the real Rie, it was disconcerting.

* * *

Eventually, we reached the library entrance after walking for some time.

Until now, we had only been in the corridor leading to the library, so there were no flames; however, the situation inside was dire.

Thick smoke billowed out.

The magnificent library was engulfed in black smoke, small flames flickering here and there.

Fortunately, the books and shelves were safeguarded by a magic barrier, which prevented the fire from spreading rapidly.

Still, other objects were ablaze, and the fire seemed to be intensifying.

"First, remove your clothes."

“…What? Have you lost your mind? Is this your true self emerging?"

Rie retorted with a sharp tongue.

"No, I meant the coat you're wearing."

I removed my academy coat and tossed it on the floor.

"The coat?"

Rie glanced at me with a perplexed expression before looking at her own coat.

"Hmm…”

She cleared her throat and took off her coat, handing it to me.

"Water Ball."

I used magic to drench the coats.

"Cover your nose and mouth with these. Though the books are safe, the burning tables and chairs can pose a danger."

"I understand."

Rie blushed as she took her own coat from me.

"Stay as low as possible and follow me."

"I said I understand."

Though Rie grumbled, she followed my instructions diligently.

Luna's likely whereabouts were fairly predictable - the desk where we used to study together every day.

I cautiously approached it.

The surrounding desks were burning, and the fire was spreading.

Fortunately, the books were still undamaged, but if the fire continued, they might be affected.

For now, I couldn't afford to worry about the books and focused solely on moving forward.

As I passed the space where librarians waited and organized books, the flames grew larger.

"Ugh…"

As I neared the location, it appeared as if Luna was there, but burning debris blocked my path.

I tried to force my way through with just my body, but it proved difficult.

Should I use magic?

As I hesitated, I heard Rie's voice from behind me.

"Wind Blaster."

As Rie chanted, a strong wind surged forward.

It swept away the burning desks obstructing our way forward.

Seeing my astonished expression, Rie gestured ahead.

"Quickly, take the lead."

Following Rie's instructions, I advanced, and Rie used magic and elementals to deflect the embers descending toward us.

We made our way deeper into the library until we reached the desks we had used every day, we found Luna lying on the floor.

Thankfully, she didn't appear to have serious injuries.

However, fire and wind swirled around her.

"Luna!"

As I called her name, a violent storm erupted from Luna's body.

"Ugh…!"

It wasn't just an ordinary wind; it was a barrage of wind blades.

Should I dodge?

No, I couldn't.

Rie was behind me.

If I dodged, Rie wouldn't have time to react and would be struck.

I shielded my face with my arms.

The wind blades flew towards me, grazing my arms and legs as they passed by.

I avoided a direct hit due to my distance from Luna, but several scratches formed on my body.

"Hey! Are you okay?"

Rie looked at me, concerned.

The wounds were minor, stinging a bit but not hindering my movement.

"Let's save Luna first."

There was a reason I took us here without relying too much on magic.

"What should we do?"

When magic went out of control like this, there were two ways to handle it.

First, endure until the person exhausts all their mana. This method was impractical

since we didn't know when faculty members would arrive.

Second, give Luna a significant shock to wake her.

This was the most effective method.

Magic going out of control was dangerous because the person would continuously cast spells while unconscious.

If the person experiencing a mana rampage regained their senses, even momentarily, they could stop the situation, and their body would automatically regulate their mana.

Waking them up was simple: give a physical shock to make them regain consciousness.

However, the problem was determining how much shock was needed to wake them.

In fact, I could use magic from my current position to deliver a shock to Luna.

But a direct hit might seriously injure her.

No matter how talented Rie and I were, we were still beginner wizards.

To reach Luna, we needed to break through the magic surrounding her.

We had to penetrate the magic without causing harm to Luna, which required delicate control.

But as beginner wizards, we weren't capable of such precise control.

So, there was only one option left.

We had to approach Luna physically.

We would break through the wind and flames and wake her up.

This was the plan I came up with.

"I'll move forward while deflecting the wind attribute magic, so make sure fire

attribute magic doesn't reach me."

"What? If we do that…"

Rie looked at me, surprised.

"Don't worry, I value my life too."

My number one priority is survival. I wouldn't gamble my life recklessly.

Hearing this, Rie gave me a faint smile.

"Alright. Give it a try."

With that, I dashed towards Luna.

I wanted to run faster, but the powerful wind gave heavy resistance.

However, there was a way to break through.

"Wind Blaster!"

I aimed the spell slightly above Luna.

A strong gust of wind surged from my hand, creating a counter wind from my direction.

While studying for the midterm exam, my magic had improved by one level.

I reached LV8, and my wind attribute magic had become stronger than before.

Luna's magic was currently being cast haphazardly.

Of course, she was in a mana rampage state, so each spell was more potent than mine.

However, she wasn't focusing her magic at a specific point.

That's why, by focusing my magic on a single point, I could break through.

Using magic to create a counter-wind, the resistance on my body disappeared.

I seized the opportunity to run towards Luna.

As I did so, flames surged from her body.

Since Luna could control both wind and fire attributes, I had anticipated this.

"Sylph, block it."

At Rie's command, a green light flew towards me.

It then generated a gust of wind, pushing the flames away.

I followed the path made by Sylph, pressing forward.

But as the flames and wind continued to blow, Sylph struggled to keep up, and our progress slowed down.

"Wind Blaster!!"

I used the spell again to repel the flames and wind.

However, the closer I got, the more potent the magic became.

"Wind Blaster! Wind Blaster!"

I had no choice but to continue using magic to advance.

I directed the wind upwards, and Rie used Sylph to push away the oncoming flames.

As we moved forward, I heard Rie's voice.

"Hey! Sylph can't push any further!"

Now, Luna and I were less than 10 meters apart.

At this distance…

"Water Ball!"

I used water attribute magic to drench myself.

"Rie! Push back the magic one more time!"

"Uh… Sylph! Push the magic upwards!"

Then, the green light beside me intensified.

Sylph created a powerful gust of wind, sending the flames upwards.

After generating such a strong wind, Sylph's form vanished with a 'pop!'

It had used all its power and was forced to unsummon.

Everything was sent flying upwards by the wind Sylph created. A path opened up.

Without hesitation, I dashed toward Luna.

Flames stood in my way, but I threw myself through them.

"Luna!"

I immediately grabbed Luna's shoulders and shook her.

"Luna! Wake up!"

However, this was a big mistake. I should have given Luna a proper shock.

"Ah…?"

As I shook her, an even more potent surge of magic expelled from her body

-Boom!!

"Ugh…!"

The powerful wind sent me flying backward.

I took the full brunt of the blast, and my body was hurled through the air, landing far away.

"Ouch!"

Mid-air, I collided with a bookshelf.

-Ooof.

Thankfully, the bookshelf's protective magic reduced the impact.

But it still hurt.

"Ugh…"

"Rudy Astria! Are you alright?"

Rie rushed over after seeing me being sent flying.

It felt like a punch to the solar plexus, and I struggled to breathe.

"Cough, huff huff… Hiccup…"

After gasping for air a few times, I started to regain my senses.

Pushed away, huh?

I assessed the situation as I adjusted my position.

My body's condition… it wasn't to the point where I couldn't stand.

Seeing I was somewhat okay, Rie began to scold me.

"Hey! You should have woken her up in one go! What did you think would happen if you just poked her like that?"

"Uh… I didn't know she would suddenly release such powerful magic."

"When you touch her, her body will instinctively release magic to protect itself! Isn't that obvious?"

I understood Rie's point after her explanation. She should have told me sooner.

"Ugh."

There was no point in blaming Rie, as it was my mistake.

I stood up and looked at Luna, who continued to expel flames and wind. Rie sighed as she looked over as well.

"Rudy Astria, give up. Sylph was unsummoned and can't be summoned again today. And if you try to go in there again, it could be disastrous."

Rie was right.

To stop someone experiencing a mana rampage, one usually needs someone several levels above them.

People usually can't use all their mana at once.

If they do, they would be unable to use magic for days due to the backlash, and their body would be a mess.

They might even lose consciousness during use.

However, someone in a mana rampage state doesn't consider this and pushes their mana to the limit.

That was why I was continuously pushed back even though my magic was superior to Luna's.

"One more time. Let's try just one more time."

Still, I couldn't give up.

"Ugh… If you fail this time too, I'm leaving you behind."

Rie sighed once more.

"I've figured out how to wake her up, so we just need to break through."

I tried to stand up by grabbing the bookshelf behind me.

“…Ouch!"

However, the bookshelf moved, causing me to fall once again.

“…What are you doing?"

Rie looked at me with pity as I fell over again.

I rubbed my hips and scowled. Why did the bookshelf move?

"What's this?"

The bookshelf had wheels attached, allowing it to move.

"Someone must have forgotten to lock the wheels."

Rie glanced at the wheels before refocusing on the main issue.

"Let's try again. I'll help as much as I can."

With that, Rie walked back toward Luna.

I let her be and focused my attention on the bookshelf that had shifted.

"What are you doing? We don't have much time."

"Let's use this."

"What?"

CHAPTER 18
THE BURNING LIBRARY (4)

I pushed the bookshelf in front of us.

"Is this possible?"

Rie expressed her doubts, but it seemed plausible.

"I flew over earlier and the bookshelf wasn't pushed away. I only pushed it slightly, and it moved. The protective magic blocks major impacts but allows it to move normally with ordinary force."

"Haa… If the protective magic fails, won't all the books burn?"

"We can cover that with our pocket money. And do you think the academy would care about a few books getting burned in a fire like this?"

"I understand using your money, but why do I have to contribute mine too?"

Rie glared at me as she spoke. I looked at her and replied.

"How stingy."

"It's reasonable."

I chuckled and looked forward.

"Let's finish the task first."

"I'll block the flames from above, so you keep running forward."

I nodded and began pushing the bookshelf.

"Wind Blaster!"

Rie cast her magic upwards.

At that moment, I pushed the bookshelf forcefully and ran.

Maintaining the bookshelf's balance, I continued pushing forward.

As expected, the protective magic activated in front of the bookshelf, repelling the spells.

Using the bookshelf as a shield, I kept advancing.

One step.

Another step.

As I got closer, my speed slowed down, but the distance between Luna and me shortened.

I looked up as I moved forward.

An immense blaze was above my head. Rie was pushing back the flames with her wind magic.

If those flames fell, I'd die instantly. However, I trusted Rie. Believing she could hold them back, I kept moving forward.

"Rudy Astria! Almost there! Wind Blaster!"

Rie cast her magic while talking to me. I pushed the bookshelf with all my might.

Bang!!

The bookshelf toppled over with a loud noise, pushing away the flames and wind in front of it.

"Luna!!!"

I stepped on the fallen bookshelf and leaped towards Luna. I wouldn't make a mistake this time. I clenched my fist as I got close to Luna.

"Wake up!!!"

I struck Luna's forehead with a powerful punch.

Smack!

"Eek!"

Luna let out a strange sound as I hit her forehead hard.

But she only opened her eyes for a moment before closing them again, as if falling back asleep.

"Did… it work?"

I muttered to myself and looked around.

The surrounding magic seemed to freeze as if time had stopped.

The flames remained, but the strong winds ceased to blow. Moreover, no new flames appeared around Luna's body.

"Ugh…"

"Luna!"

Luna moaned and tossed in her sleep.

And then.

The fire and wind sustained by magic.

They began to fade away.

"Haah… Is it over…?"

As the magic disappeared, Rie collapsed onto the floor.

I checked on Luna's condition first.

Though she seemed to be unconscious, I didn't see any serious injuries.

"Thank goodness…"

I let out a sigh of relief and looked at the book lying beside her.

It appeared to be a valuable grimoire, with a soft leather cover.

"As I thought… a grimoire."

Luna's treasure.

It was a grimoire given to her by the Royal Wizard Levian.

I picked up the grimoire and opened it.

On the displayed page, a square magical circle was drawn.

It reminded me of the magical circle Luna had drawn.

"It was because of this…"

I knew about this grimoire.

It was truly the ultimate grimoire for those who dealt with magical circles.

The reason Luna became incredibly powerful in the game.

This grimoire was a scroll in book form.

Moreover, a scroll that could be used without tearing.

The disadvantage of a mage who mainly used magical circles was that they couldn't respond to sudden events.

It was impossible to carry all the scrolls for every magic, and even if they carried multiple scrolls, they were just one-time-use spells.

However, this grimoire compensated for that disadvantage.

If they wanted to use a certain magical circle engraved in the book, they could use it just by thinking about it.

Of course, they had to pay the required mana themselves, but it was an incredibly overpowered item compared to one-time-use scrolls.

Thanks to this grimoire, Luna would become one of the strongest magic users in the latter half of the game.

This square magical circle drawn in the grimoire.

She probably thought to try using it because it was similar to the magical circle she had drawn.

This incident was my mistake.

I thought Luna caused this incident because Professor Mcguire had given her a tight deadline.

However, the likely cause of this incident was this square magical circle.

It was such a trivial reason.

"It's really confusing."

I felt the same way last time.

When I heard that Garwel had been the one behind the red-headed troublemaker.

I thought I knew everything about this world because I had played the game dozens of times.

However, I only knew the results of this world, not the causes.

It was my arrogance to try to control this world with the scenes I saw in the game.

I couldn't change all the game events without knowing that.

"Let's think about this later."

I sighed at my own mistake and carried Luna.

I also held Luna's grimoire in my hand.

"What's this?"

Rie looked at me with a puzzled expression.

"I'll escape through the window at the back."

"What?"

Rie stared at me, incredulous.

"Luna can't be here, right?"

"Then what about me?"

"I have a favor to ask of you too."

"You… I've already helped so much, and you still have more to ask?"

"Use water attribute magic to flood this place."

I wanted to ask her to extinguish the fire, but Rie had already used a significant amount of mana.

I didn't want to burden her further.

However, we needed to use magic here to erase Luna's mana traces.

Although both my magic and Rie's had been used extensively, some traces might remain.

Wind attribute magic had mixed our mana traces, but fire attribute magic only had Luna's mana traces left.

To erase the traces, we had to either overlap them with the same attribute magic or cover them with opposing attributes.

We couldn't enlarge the fire with fire attribute magic, so we needed to cover the traces with water attribute magic, minimizing them as much as possible.

Rie glared at me, her face filled with anger.

"Do you think I'm your servant? Just following your orders?"

Carrying Luna, I bowed to Rie.

"Please, I beg you. I'll do anything you ask later."

Seeing me bowing sincerely, Rie sighed.

"You better know that I'll make you work your bones off later."

"Of course."

I walked towards the back of the library. Then Rie called out to me.

"Hey, if they ask where you are, what should I say?"

"Just tell them I got scared and ran away."

"Ran away?"

With that, I escaped through the window at the back of the library.

"Haah…"

Rie sighed deeply as she watched me leave.

* * *

After Rudy left the library, Rie sat in a corner.

"Sigh… Seriously."

Rie let out a deep sigh as she pondered her situation.

"I'm a princess… Damn it…"

She looked at herself, wearing her wet uniform and covered in soot. She felt dirty and uncomfortable.

She wanted to run to the bathroom and wash herself right away.

She was also annoyed.

Tell them he ran away?

Did he not know what would happen to him if she said that? It would only add fuel to his already unfavorable reputation.

Rie took a moment to collect her thoughts and then muttered to herself.

"I'll do it like this."

Rie stood up from her seat.

"Locke! Come in!"

She called out loudly for Locke, who entered the library. Locke looked around.

"Where did Rudy Astria go?"

"Forget it. You don't need to know. Just do what I ask."

"What do you need me to do?"

"Move all the books I mention from their locations to the window at the back of the library."

"Understood."

Rie spoke and cast a spell.

"Water Ball!"

"Which books should I move first?"

"Mana Reconstitution in row T, number 12, and Orwell's Mana Theory in row Z,

number 16."

Following Rie's instructions, Locke continued to move the books, while Rie used magic to extinguish the flames.

"Rudy!! Rie!! Where are you!!"

Professor Mcguire shouted as he entered the library.

He was the first professor to arrive at the academy.

Fortunately, he hadn't been drinking, so he was able to come immediately.

Of course, it took some time for him to get here from his house outside the academy.

Calling out for Rudy and Rie, Professor Mcguire ventured further into the library. He looked around.

"The fire seems to have mostly died down…"

"It appears so."

Astina followed behind Professor Mcguire and spoke up.

"I heard it was a huge fire. Did those two put it out?"

"We'll have to find them and hear the story first."

"If the two students are seriously injured, you'll have to take responsibility, Astina Persia."

"It should be fine."

Astina confidently replied.

Judging by the mostly extinguished fire, it seemed that they had succeeded in stopping Luna Railer.

Astina and Professor Mcguire continued deeper into the library.

-Splash.

"Huh? What's with all this water…?"

As Professor Mcguire went further in, he noticed the wet floor.

It was strange, as this place had clearly been engulfed in a massive fire, yet the surroundings were soaked.

"Huh?"

Professor Mcguire looked around as he moved forward and spotted Rie.

"Rie! Are you alright?!"

Rie was sitting down, leaning against a bookshelf.

Her hair was drenched, and her face was covered in soot.

"Haah…"

"Pfft…"

Astina couldn't help but laugh at Rie's appearance.

Nevertheless, looking around, it seemed like the situation had been resolved.

"Rie! What happened?"

"Ah… We just put out the fire."

Rie casually replied without her usual pretense.

Professor Mcguire was taken aback by her attitude and asked again.

"Ah… Well, where's Rudy? Where did he go?"

"Haah…"

Rie let out an even deeper sigh.

"Rudy Astria has returned to his room."

"What? To his room?"

Professor Mcguire asked with a puzzled expression.

Rie didn't say anything further but led him towards the window. There were numerous books piled up there.

"How…?"

These were no ordinary books.

They were all managed by the librarian personally.

Though they weren't treasured items, they certainly had some value as collectibles.

"Although there's protection magic on the books, Rudy Astria moved them all, fearing that the fire might damage them if it persisted. While he was doing that, I extinguished the fire."

"Rudy did?"

"Rudy Astria often comes to the library and knows the value and locations of the books, so he could move them."

"Oh, I see…"

Professor Mcguire couldn't help but express a hint of admiration.

Rie continued speaking as she saw Professor Mcguire's reaction.

"Then, he suffered a minor burn and returned to his room."

"A burn? Is he seriously injured?"

"No, he received proper first aid, and the situation was somewhat resolved, so we just sent him back."

"But I didn't hear about him leaving the library separately?"

With a slight hint of doubt, Professor Mcguire asked.

"He went around the back because there were too many people in front of the library."

"I see… It's fortunate that no one was seriously injured. Rie, you should go back to your room and rest as well."

"Yes, thank you."

As Rie tried to walk past Professor Mcguire and head outside, she made eye contact with Astina. Astina smiled and said to Rie,

"That was impressive."

"Are you mocking me?"

Rie shot a brief glare at Astina and walked toward the exit.

"Clean."

Astina cast a spell on Rie as she walked away.

Immediately, her clothes became tidy, and the soot and other marks on her face disappeared.

Rie, surprised by the sudden cleanliness, turned around to look back.

"I learned this spell just a while ago, and it seems to work well~."

Astina smiled brightly as she spoke to Rie.

Rie glanced at Astina for a moment before continuing her walk toward the exit.

CHAPTER 19
THE BURNING LIBRARY (5)

Late at night, the sound of cricket chirps filled my quiet room.

"Haah…"

Leaving all the noise and chaos behind, I felt a sense of calm wash over me.

It seemed like everything had ended well.

Although I wasn't sure about the aftermath, I believed Rie and Astina would handle it.

I lowered Luna, who I had been carrying, onto my bed.

"Uh…"

Luna groaned and began to regain consciousness.

"Luna, are you alright?"

I sat her down on my bed, holding her head.

"Where… is this?"

Luna looked around, frowning.

"It's my room."

"You…?"

Luna raised her head to look at me standing in front of her.

"Ru… Rudy? How did you…? No, more importantly, ah…!"

As if realizing something, Luna opened her eyes wide and scanned the room.

"Huh? I was in the library, right? I was touching a book… Ah! The book? Was there a grimoire nearby where I was? It has a high-quality leather cover…!"

"Here it is."

I handed over Levian's grimoire, which I had placed beside me.

Seeing her search for the book as soon as she regained consciousness, I could tell how much Luna cherished it.

"Th-thank goodness… But, what happened? I remember touching this grimoire and then losing consciousness."

I explained the situation to the confused Luna.

I told her about Luna's mana explosion and the burning library, but I didn't go into too much detail.

If I went too deep, I would have to mention what I knew about the grimoire.

Luna would be even more confused if she knew I had information I wasn't supposed to know…

"So that's what happened… I…"

After hearing the whole story, Luna bowed her head.

I could feel various emotions from her expression, like remorse and sadness.

I didn't say anything else.

The sound of cricket chirps filled the silence.

In the midst of the quiet, Luna spoke up.

"You know, Rudy, I was a real troublemaker when I was young."

Luna, who said that, had a bitter expression on her face.

"You might not know this since you lived in the capital, but it's difficult to find friends when you live on the outskirts of the empire. Especially friends of similar status."

Luna continued.

"Because of that, I would cause mischief everywhere out of boredom. I would play pranks on the villagers' crops or ride on the animals the villagers raised…"

Luna reminisced and smiled faintly.

"One day, while I was playing like that, a wizard visited our territory."

"A wizard…"

The royal wizard, Levian, must have been the one.

"It was an old man with an enormous beard who said he would rest in our territory for a while. So, my father… no, my dad offered him a nice place to stay."

"But, that old man said there was no need for that. He would just find a place to rest on his own and asked us not to worry about him."

"So, what happened?"

As I asked, Luna replied with a smile.

"That wizard built a small hut on the outskirts of our territory and stayed there. It was a really shabby hut…"

Luna looked up at the ceiling as if reminiscing.

"And that wizard helped the people in our territory every day. He took care of the residents, made the territory prosperous, and drove away monsters."

"He sounds like a good person."

"Right? I was curious about that wizard, so I visited him every day. But every day, he drove me away."

"Being young and mischievous, I became even more determined to visit him. Of

course, I played pranks on that hut every day… like I said before, I was a troublemaker."

Luna scratched her head, looking somewhat embarrassed.

"By visiting him every day, I found something the wizard treasured. It was a magic tome that looked valuable at first glance. The wizard held it in his hand even while sleeping and doing other things."

"So, I decided to play a prank with that magic tome. I wanted to fool the wizard who drove me away every day. I planned to steal the tome and make a fool of him."

"Did you succeed?"

"No, it was too difficult to steal that magic tome. It was impossible for an ordinary child like me to steal something from a wizard. Hehe…"

She continued with a laugh.

"One day, when I was trying to steal the magic tome, I encountered a monster on my way to the hut. The hut was on the outskirts, so the monster had come there."

"I cried and ran away. However, being a young child, I couldn't escape from the monster. I was caught and faced a life-threatening situation. That's when the wizard appeared."

Luna looked down with a faint smile.

"The wizard instantly eliminated the monster, and I was saved. After that, my father didn't allow me to leave my room."

"But one day, I got a chance to escape from my room. I immediately left my room and headed for the hut where the wizard was."

"And then?"

"Um… when I got to the hut, the wizard was lying down in one corner, sleeping. As a normal child, I should have thanked him, but I didn't show my gratitude and was mischievous instead. You know, young kids often play pranks as a sign of affection."

"I looked around and found the magic tome near the wizard. So, I decided to steal it. I took the magic tome and returned to my room. And then I waited for the wizard to come to our mansion."

Luna made a pained expression as she spoke.

Such an agonizing look on her face.

"But even after a day or two had passed, he didn't come to the mansion. I felt something was off because the townspeople usually came to see me the day after I caused trouble."

"I was being spiteful and decided not to give him the magic book until he came looking for me. Then one day, there was a commotion in our territory."

With a choked-up voice, Luna continued.

"The wizard… The old man was found dead in his house."

Luna let out an awkward laugh. Her expression looked as if she was about to cry at any moment.

"I later found out that he had passed away due to old age… He was so old… That powerful wizard who could defeat even the strongest monsters…"

Luna repeated herself, seemingly swallowing her tears.

"I never got the chance to thank the old man even once. Then my father handed me a letter. He said it was a letter the old man had left for me. I immediately opened it."

"In the letter, there was a lot of content. Among them was a message saying that I had talent in magic and that I should do whatever it takes to get into Liberion Academy…"

"And there was this sentence…"

Taking a deep breath, Luna continued.

"He said he was never bored, thanks to me. That's why he wanted to give me this magic book as a gift."

Luna showed me the magic book she was holding. Tears welled up in her eyes.

"How foolish, right? I just caused trouble and was a nuisance, but he wanted to give me this magic book. He said I had talent in magic… What does he know about me…"

Luna bit her lower lip.

"But he believed in me so much, and all I do is cause accidents… The real fool is me."

I looked at Luna. This was a story I had never heard before.

In the game, the story usually revolved around Evan.

Evan would console Luna by sharing his own story after Luna had burned the library.

So, I had no idea Luna had such a story.

Many thoughts crossed my mind.

Should I comfort Luna?

Should I empathize with her and pat her back?

I made up my mind and opened my mouth.

"Luna."

As I called her, Luna lifted her head and looked at me.

However, I spat out cold words at her.

"I won't empathize with your situation, nor will I comfort you."

"…?"

At my words, Luna raised her head.

"Your parents might understand your situation and try to help you in any way they can, but I won't."

I thought that harsh words were necessary.

I wouldn't comfort her for her failure.

If a person keeps receiving comfort for their failures, they'll get used to failing.

"Right now, my life is hard and burdensome. I'm too busy thinking about my future to have the leisure to worry about you."

Luna lowered her head.

"I'm sorry… I-"

"But," I interrupted Luna's words.

"Even if I can't empathize with your hardships, I can still be happy with your joy."

Luna looked at me with a puzzled expression.

"When you succeed, when you achieve something, when you accomplish something. At that moment, I can truly be happy with you. I can smile and sincerely congratulate you."

I said those words with a faint smile. I wanted to let her know how much happiness awaited her when she succeeded, even if I couldn't comfort her in her failures.

"Overcome it. You can overcome it. These failures and difficulties are for you to bear and stand up from."

People often say that the person beside you during tough times is a true friend.

But I don't think so.

My life is also harsh and painful, how could I bear someone else's pain as well?

I believe a true friend is someone who doesn't leave you during difficult times.

There's no need to stay by their side all the time. You don't need to share their pain. After all, everyone has their own life.

That's why a true friend is someone who waits for you from afar until you succeed.

Someone who waits until you're genuinely happy. Someone who can truly rejoice with you.

That person is a true friend.

Tears streamed down Luna's face. However, she was smiling. She smiled brightly.

"If this isn't consolation, then what is… You're such a fool."

Luna said that and stood up from her seat.

"You're a fool too… Can I ask a favor from such a fool?"

Luna shoved a magic book at me.

"…?"

"Take this. Keep it with you. It's my most precious possession, so handle it with care."

"Why are you giving this to me?"

"I think it's something I can't handle right now. Hold onto it, and when you think I'm ready, give it back to me."

Luna grinned.

"Please watch me succeed once. As my sponsor, you can at least have that much patience, right?"

I accepted the magic book.

"I'm looking forward to it."

I smiled at Luna as I took the magic book. Luna smiled back at me, but suddenly furrowed her brow and rubbed her forehead.

"Why does my forehead hurt so much…?"

Ah.

"Could it be a side effect of the mana explosion?"

"Is that it?"

I couldn't bring myself to tell her that I had punched her in the head in this kind of atmosphere.

CHAPTER 20
INTERMEDIATE MAGIC (1)

A few days after the incident.

"Rudyyyyy!"

After class, Luna spotted Rudy and called his name as she ran towards him.

Ena and Riku, who were with Luna, watched the scene.

"It's strange."

Riku muttered to herself, prompting Ena to ask,

"What's strange?"

"The way Luna calls Rudy Astria. It's a bit odd."

"How?"

As Ena asked, Riku stroked her chin and looked up.

"Hmm… Luna used to call Rudy Astria 'Rudy!'"

"Right?"

"But these days, she's been calling him 'Rudyyyyy!'"

Ena's face went black for a moment as she heard the story.

"Why?"

"Ena! Don't you see the difference between 'Rudy!' and 'Rudyyyyy!'?"

“…I don't think anyone would understand that."

Riku thought for a moment before speaking up.

"Somehow, 'Rudy!' feels friendly, but 'Rudyyyyy!' is a bit different. It's like… something has changed."

Ena glanced at Riku for a moment and then chuckled.

"Yeah, Riku, you do have some insight."

Luna's attitude had been strange for a few days.

She had always been close with Rudy Astria, but their bond seemed to have grown stronger.

Rudy Astria didn't seem to have changed much, but Luna was different.

Their relationship seemed to be more than just close friends or colleagues.

"I wonder what happened…"

Ena looked at Rudy Astria with suspicious eyes.

Clap!-

Suddenly, Riku clapped her hands.

"Hmm?"

Ena looked at Riku, who was smiling.

"Did you figure something out?"

Riku looked at Ena and grinned even more.

"No! I have no idea!"

"…Right."

She didn't know what Luna was feeling, but she resolved to help Luna as much as possible.

* * *

After the library fire, we enjoyed a few peaceful days.

Rie was acknowledged for her efforts in extinguishing the fire and received a commendation.

And somehow, I'm not sure how, but I also received words of gratitude from the professors.

They said giving me a commendation might be difficult, but they still appreciated my hard work.

I clearly told Rie to say I ran away, but I'm not sure what happened.

Honestly, who wouldn't feel good when everyone's expressing their gratitude?

I just happily went along with it.

It didn't seem like there would be any issues with the story since rumors about me hadn't spread among the students.

I didn't care too much about Rie receiving the commendation either.

After all, Rie was the type to sweep up all the awards and certificates as the game progressed.

However, there was one problem.

It seemed like Rie had no particular thoughts about Evan.

Originally, when Evan took the top spot, Rie's gaze would be directed at him.

She would look at Evan with interest.

But she was so busy with the library incident that she hadn't paid any attention to Evan.

"Is it twisted already…?"

It was too early to judge that things had gone awry.

I decided to wait and see before making any decisions.

On a happier note, there was another piece of good news.

My Beginner Magic level had reached 9.

It was probably thanks to the real-life experience.

I had studied the theory diligently until now, but I had no practical experience.

Suddenly, having that practical experience caused my magic proficiency to increase explosively.

Looking at my current magic abilities, it seemed like I could reach Intermediate Magic with a bit more effort.

My goal was to learn at least some Dark Magic before the midterm camp.

That way, I could survive the event.

Of course, there was a problem to solve before that.

I opened the door to the student council room and entered.

"Oh, Rudy Astria, you're here?"

Astina and Rie were there.

"Rudy Astria, long time no see~."

Rie greeted me with a bright smile.

Her tone was not as aggressive as it was during the library incident, but rather her usual friendly demeanor.

I frowned and opened my mouth.

"You said to speak informally. Is there anyone here besides us?"

"Sigh…”

Upon hearing my words, Rie sighed and crossed her legs.

"Well, I guess there's no need to hide it now."

Rie spoke in a cold tone, not her usual gentle one.

It was a fierce tone, but it felt more comfortable.

"Shall we talk about 'that incident' now?"

She was referring to the library incident.

When the incident occurred, we brushed it off vaguely, but now it was time for a proper explanation.

And it was time for me to hear a proper explanation about them as well.

"First, Rudy Astria, tell us how you knew. How did you know Luna Railer would cause such an incident?"

Astina asked me.

I took a magic book from my bag.

Levian's magic book.

The magic book that Luna had handed over to me.

"Luna had this magic book."

"A magic book?"

Astina took the book and tried to open it.

"It's better not to open it. If something goes wrong, Astina might lose control too."

“…Fine."

Astina listened to me and put the magic book down again.

"So, what is this magic book?"

Rie asked me.

"The Royal Wizard, Levian's magic book."

"Levian…?"

Levian was a famous wizard for his magic circles.

Although it wasn't mentioned in the game, it seemed that he was a well-known wizard in the world of magic here.

"When Luna was young, Levian died in the Railer territory."

"What?"

According to my findings, Levian's death wasn't officially recorded.

He was merely listed as missing.

This told me one thing.

The head of the Railer family, Luna's father, didn't report Levian's death to the royal family.

"How did he die?"

"I'm not exactly sure, but it's believed to be due to aging. This part might be wrong, so just keep that in mind."

"Then how did Luna's mental contamination occur?"

I explained to Astina about how to use this magic book in response to her question.

A magic book that allows the use of magic without scrolls.

As I told them the story, both Astina and Rie frowned.

"A scroll that can be used infinitely… Why isn't this known to the world? If multiple books like this are created…"

Astina started to speak but stopped.

"…Did they run away?"

I looked at Astina as she spoke.

I had thought the same thing.

Levian created that fraudulent magic book and fled.

And to find him, he was reported missing.

The place Levian reached after fleeing was the Railer territory.

I could make that much of a guess.

"Who did he run away from?"

"It seems we'll have to find that out. The fact that he fled is just speculation, not certainty."

"Then, digging up information on Levian should be our priority."

Rie summarized the situation.

After listening to the conversation, I opened my mouth to speak.

"But do we really need to find out?"

After all, what Levian's plan was and who he was didn't matter to me.

There was no other influence from Levian at the academy besides this magic book.

"It doesn't hurt to know. Information can become a lifeline or a source of money."

Astina responded to my words.

Of course, it's not wrong to say that, but isn't there a saying that ignorance is bliss?

"Alright, I'll do a rough investigation."

So I left that for Rie to investigate.

I then asked Rie a question.

"What's the deal between you and Astina?"

"An alliance."

"I'll help Rie become emperor, and Rie will make me the Viscount of Persia. That's our plan."

Astina briefly elaborated on Rie's words.

"Is it because of Yuni?"

Yuni von Ristonia.

The Second Princess of the Empire and Rie's rival.

Rie was obviously ahead in terms of ability, but Yuni had other support.

Yuni had the support of the Astria family, the Nobles faction.

Three factions appear in this game.

The Rebels, the Nobles, and the Royalists.

The conflict between these three types of factions was the main story of the game.

When we become second-year students and Yuni enters the academy, the structure of these three factions is established.

"Can you even tell me this?"

Even if I was a discarded child, I belonged to the Astria family.

The Astria family was the leader of the nobles.

Isn't it strange to say such things?

"Don't you know already know this much?"

Rie spoke as if it were absurd.

"'Rudy Astria will have a hard time making a name for himself in politics.' Well, that makes you a better ally."

Astina also seemed to agree with Rie's words.

"So, what do you plan to do?"

As I asked, Rie answered.

"I'll help you become the head of the Astria family. Then all our problems will be solved."

“…What?"

* * *

I finished the conversation and returned to my room, deep in thought.

Take over the Astria family?

This suggestion was tantamount to completely twisting the story.

And it wasn't an easy task.

First of all, the gap between my brother and me was too wide.

My brother, who had already made a name for himself in politics, compared to me, who had just entered the academy and even lost the top spot.

No matter what anyone says, my brother would be the one to inherit the family.

"Haah… What a headache."

I agreed with them in that situation, but I'm not sure what they were thinking.

"Rudyyyy!"

While I was lost in thought, Luna came running, calling my name.

Luna ran up to me, looked at me, and smiled.

"Rudy, where are we going to study today?"

Since the library incident, Luna seemed more lively.

However, we had lost our study space.

The fire in the library required repairs, so the library was closed for a while.

We could borrow books, but we couldn't use the space inside for reading or studying.

So lately, Luna and I would rent a classroom to study together.

We couldn't rent a classroom alone, so we went together to rent one.

Of course, Riku and Ena often joined us.

"Today, I think I'll practice magic in the lab?"

Although I had lost the top spot, I could still use the first-place student laboratory.

The proper first place would be determined by the total score at the end of the semester.

I glanced at Riku and Ena behind me.

With those two around, they could rent a classroom without me, so it shouldn't be a problem.

"Is… is that so? I see."

Luna looked a bit disappointed.

Then she changed her expression and opened her mouth.

"Well, I guess there's no helping it… Then later—."

"Ah…! Oh, that's right! Now that I think about it, I have an assignment, so I think I'll need to go to a lab?"

Just as Luna was about to say something, Ena suddenly interrupted.

The usually quiet Ena spoke with an unusually lively voice.

"Huh?"

Luna looked at Ena for a moment.

"Ah! Ah! Now that I think about it, Riku! I think you'll need to help me! It's an assignment related to water attribute magic!"

"Water… attribute?"

Riku looked puzzled as she spoke to Ena.

"Luna… I don't think we can rent a classroom together… I'm really sorry."

"Uh…? Really? You said you didn't have any separate things to study just now…"

"I forgot, okay~. And Luna can't use water attribute magic… I think Riku will have to help me…"

Riku patted her chest and said,

"Ahem! That's right! Luna might be better at magic than me, but I'm better at using water attribute magic!"

Ena grabbed Riku's wrist as she spoke and began to lead her away.

"Eh? We're leaving already?"

"Luna sorry!! Riku, you better follow quickly."

"Ugh…”

Luna and I blankly watched Ena walk away, dragging Riku along with her.

"Uh… what should we do?"

With those two gone, Luna couldn't borrow a study space.

But she couldn't give up on magic practice for today either.

With midterm camp approaching, she needed to reach intermediate magic as soon as possible.

“…Luna, want to go to the lab with me?"

"Huh…?"

CHAPTER 21
INTERMEDIATE MAGIC (2)

"Luna, would you like to practice magic with me?"

'The two of us?'

That thought immediately sprang to Luna's mind upon hearing Rudy's suggestion.

Lately, Luna had been experiencing a peculiar sensation.

Whenever she was in Rudy's presence, her heart seemed to have a mind of its own.

She felt a strange warmth.

To hide these feelings, she acted more energetic than usual.

She thought that if she tried to act as usual, she'd be unable to speak.

But the idea of being alone in the laboratory with Rudy made her nervous.

It was already hard for her to focus in the spacious classroom, let alone in the smaller lab.

Even when studying and they were slightly apart, she found herself constantly distracted by Rudy.

Yet, she didn't want to distance herself from him. Instead, she wanted to be closer.

These conflicting emotions left her utterly confused.

She felt that way even now.

The top student lab was a smaller space compared to the classroom.

Imagining herself in that confined space with Rudy made her face feel like it would

burst from embarrassment.

But she wanted to go.

'Yes… Let's go study magic together since Ena and Riku aren't around! Right! We're going to study magic!'

Thump, thump.

Her heart pounded as she thought about it.

"Alright! It's been a while since we practiced magic together!"

Trying to hide her chaotic thoughts, Luna spoke with enthusiasm.

Following Rudy, she headed toward the top student lab.

Though she had visited the lab once before, it felt different this time.

In her initial visit, she was still suspicious and fearful towards Rudy.

"Come in," Rudy said, opening the lab door.

"Excuse me," Luna replied.

"There's no need for formalities when it's just us."

"Is that so…?"

Luna awkwardly smiled and entered the lab.

"I'll practice magic over here. If you want to study magic circles or something, you can use the temporary scrolls over there."

"Thank you, hehe."

Luna smiled at Rudy's kind explanation. He gave her a faint smile in return before immersing himself in his magic practice.

"I should practice too…"

Luna briefly watched Rudy before starting her own practice.

Thump, thump-

'Why… Why can't I concentrate?'

Luna occasionally stole glances at Rudy, who was focusing.

The confined space.

The close distance.

Thump, thump.

'Uh… Can he hear it?'

Her heart raced even faster.

'Please, calm down… '

Luna placed her hand on her chest and took several deep breaths, but it didn't help.

She glanced at Rudy, worrying that he could hear her racing heart.

Rudy was fully concentrating on practicing magic and didn't seem to notice anything else.

Determined, Luna decided to concentrate on her practice as well.

And so, both Rudy and Luna began to focus intently on practicing their magic.

"Phew…”

Luna thought she had studied diligently and looked up.

However, Rudy remained engrossed in his own magic practice.

'Rudy really has great focus… '

Rudy always focused solely on his studies, never letting anything else distract him.

It was impressive and she admired him for it. She stared intently at Rudy as he concentrated.

'His eyelashes are so long… and his skin is incredibly fair… '

As she watched Rudy, Luna noticed details she hadn't seen before.

Recently, she had been unable to look him in the eye, so she hadn't had the chance to take a proper look at his face.

'He… he's handsome… '

At the time, it was like admiring a piece of art – simply appreciating its beauty and moving on.

But now, things were different.

Staring directly at his face, Luna felt her heart race and her cheeks flush.

'What… what's going on?'

Luna was utterly bewildered but didn't look away.

She continued to gaze intently at Rudy's face.

Gulp-

As Luna swallowed, Rudy suddenly sprang to his feet.

"Done…!"

"Ah!"

Startled by Rudy's abrupt outburst, Luna let out a small cry.

Rudy looked at her, and for a moment, she didn't know where to direct her gaze.

'D… did he notice?'

"Uh, Luna, sorry. Did I startle you?"

"Ah, no, no, no… It's… it's fine! I wasn't startled!"

Despite her obvious surprise, Luna blurted out an obvious lie.

Rudy tilted his head for a moment before speaking.

"Sorry, I finally achieved what I wanted."

"What was it?"

"I've reached intermediate magic."

"Int… intermediate magic?"

Luna was astonished.

She knew Rudy was talented in magic, but she didn't expect him to reach intermediate level so soon.

Usually, students would achieve intermediate magic during their second year, or exceptionally gifted first-year students might reach it during their second semester.

However, midterm exams had just ended.

This meant that Rudy had reached intermediate magic at an unbelievable pace.

Of course, some people reached intermediate magic quickly but were unable to progress further due to the barrier of talent.

Nevertheless, the accomplishment was impressive.

Luna looked at Rudy, who was beaming with pride.

Was that what talent looked like?

Rudy was moving ahead of her.

She admired him but also felt a tinge of jealousy.

However, her jealousy didn't last long.

Luna genuinely wished for Rudy's success.

She wanted him to do well, not only because he had helped her so much, but also because she had seen how hard he worked.

Rudy, who didn't indulge in leisure activities and studied every day.

Rudy, who stood firm and focused on his own tasks even when others criticized him.

Anyone who saw him would want to cheer him on. Luna smiled and spoke with heartfelt sincerity.

"Well done! Congratulations, Rudy!"

* * *

The next day.

Instead of having lunch with Luna, I went straight to a place I wanted to visit.

The professors' smoking area behind the academy.

“…Rudy Astria?"

There were two people there.

Professors Cromwell and Robert.

Professor Cromwell was smoking, while Professor Robert sat in front of him, not smoking.

Their images seemed reversed – I would have expected Professor Robert to be the smoker and Professor Cromwell to abstain.

"Did you come here to smoke too?"

Professor Robert asked with a sly smile.

"No."

It was an obvious answer. Academy regulations prohibited students from smoking.

"What brings you here then?"

There was only one reason I came.

I had simply heard that Professors Robert and Cromwell would be in the smoking area together when lunchtime began.

And so…

"Professor Robert, if you haven't eaten yet, would you like to join me for a meal?"

“…Me?"

Professor Robert asked with a puzzled expression.

"Robert being sought for student counseling… This must be a first. Hehe."

Professor Cromwell laughed pleasantly.

"Hey, you have a professor here who likes you so much. Why eat with me?"

Professor Robert pointed at Professor Cromwell as he spoke. I stared intently at him.

"Heh, a professor refusing student counseling would be quite something."

Professor Cromwell put out his cigarette.

"Although it's a bit disappointing that you didn't come to me, I'll allow it since he's my friend."

"What are you, his father? And who are you to allow it or not?"

Grumbling, Professor Robert stood up and walked forward.

"Haah… Follow me."

"Then I'll go eat with the other professors. Good luck with the counseling."

Professor Cromwell waved goodbye and walked away.

As I watched him leave, Professor Robert called out to me.

"What are you doing?"

"Ah… I'll follow you."

I chased after Professor Robert.

He led me to a small, shabby diner within the academy.

A rundown diner.

It seemed like it could collapse with just a touch.

"You've never eaten at a place like this, have you?"

Professor Robert grumbled.

"Robert, who is this young man?"

An old lady emerged from the back of the store.

She seemed to be on friendly terms with Professor Robert, asking casually.

"Just a student."

"Your disciple?"

"No, not my disciple. Just a student. A friend's disciple."

"I am Professor Robert's disciple. Pleased to meet you."

I greeted the old lady politely.

"Why are you my disciple?"

"Kuku… When someone volunteers to be your disciple, why not accept? He looks like a noble but seems to have some manners. A low-ranking noble perhaps?"

"Watch your mouth. He's the second son of the Astria family."

“…What?"

Professor Robert's words widened the old woman's eyes.

"Are you talking about that Astria family I know?"

"Is there another Astria family in the empire?"

"Ah… I've seen all sorts of things in my long life. I'm not sure if someone from such a family can enjoy our humble restaurant's food."

With that, the old woman went inside the restaurant.

"Should I order our usual?"

"Yes, two servings of that, please."

Professor Robert said that and took a seat. Then he spoke to me.

"What are you waiting for? Sit down. Do I need to pull the chair out for you?"

"No, sir."

I sat down across from Professor Robert.

"You grew up in a duke's household, yet you're very polite. Is that how you normally treat commoners?"

"I'm just being respectful to my elders."

Even in this fantasy world, respect for one's elders was a basic courtesy. Of course, it wasn't essential for those with high status and capabilities, but it was a good thing to do.

"So, why did you call me here?"

True to Professor Robert's easy-going nature, he went straight to the point. I preferred it that way.

I didn't like to observe and analyze my opponent like Rie.

I spoke directly to him.

"Please take me as your disciple."

"Disciple?"

Professor Robert looked incredulous. I repeated my request.

"Teach me dark magic."

"Ha…!"

Annoyance began to show in Professor Robert's eyes.

"Do you even know what dark magic is?"

"It's the most powerful magic among all magics."

"And where does that power come from?"

That power came from…

"Risk."

"Right, well-learned. Dark magic involves taking risks to use it. Normal magic follows an equivalent exchange, using mana. The amount of mana used determines its power."

"I know that."

"Then, is dark magic equivalent exchange?"

"No."

Dark magic differed from normal magic. For one, there was mental contamination when it failed.

This was merely a fraction of the risks associated with dark magic.

It required the user to sacrifice their health, parts of their body, and in extreme cases, even their soul.

"I don't want to be killed by your father."

"My family doesn't care about me."

"Your family may have abandoned you as an heir, but I doubt your father has abandoned you as his son."

I couldn't refute that statement, having never met my father.

The Duke of Astria might have given up on me as his successor, but it was uncertain whether he had given up on me as his son.

"Why would the son of the Astria family want to learn dark magic? You should go to Professor Cromwell and learn telekinesis instead."

Professor Cromwell's telekinesis was indeed versatile and useful in battle. However, it wasn't enough to survive.

Being versatile meant it couldn't focus on a particular area. It was similar to the saying that there's a fine line between being a jack-of-all-trades and a master of none.

Moreover, dark magic had many applications, much like telekinesis.

Naturally, the reason was the associated risks.

"Already trying when you haven't even reached intermediate magic…"

"I have reached intermediate magic."

"…What?"

Professor Robert asked with a baffled expression.

"You've… reached intermediate magic?"

Such a reaction was expected.

Even grinding in the game wouldn't allow someone to reach intermediate magic at this pace.

It was the result of Rudy Astria's already high magic level, the incident with Luna, and relentless practice whenever he had spare time.

It took luck, effort, and talent to achieve such results.

“…That's an absurd amount of talent."

"I've simply put in the effort."

After a brief moment of contemplation, Professor Robert spoke.

"Alright, I'll give you a test."

"A test?"

"Learn Abyssal Flame by midterm camp. Then, I'll teach you dark magic."

Abyssal Flame - the most basic dark magic spell. It wasn't impossible to achieve, and the given time frame was perfect, lining up with my initial plan.

"So, will you take me as your disciple?"

"Disciple? I'm just saying I'll teach you. Why would I take a novice like you as my disciple?"

"Understood."

I accepted Professor Robert's proposal.

"I'll learn it quickly."

"Heh… go on, give it a try."

Professor Robert laughed with a meaningful smile.

"Ah, the food is here."

Our conversation continued as the food arrived. Upon seeing the dishes, dozens of question marks popped up in my head.

"Huh?"

"There's no other food, so eat this gratefully."

A savory aroma wafted through the air, accompanied by familiar bowls.

"Here's your meal."

The server handed over a bowl of white rice. The dish served at the restaurant was none other than a bubbling pot of cheonggukjang (Korean fermented soybean stew).

While the other side dishes were unfamiliar, the comforting smell of the stew was unmistakable.

"What do young masters like you… Huh?"

I immediately began devouring the meal, spoon in hand.

"You… Why are you eating so well?"

I didn't bother responding to Professor Robert and continued to stuff my face with rice.

After eating only Western-style meat and vegetables every day, this Korean dish was incredibly touching.

Who would have thought I'd find cheonggukjang in a fantasy world?

The experience was almost tear-jerking.

"It's so… delicious… sniff."

Even when I had defeated the game's final boss after 20 attempts, I never felt this moved.

Cheonggukjang in a fantasy world seemed impossible, but today, I was grateful for this out-of-place development.

"One more bowl, please."

"Uh… sure."

The restaurant's elderly owner, taken aback, handed me another bowl of rice.

Overwhelmed with emotion, I ended up eating three bowls of rice that day.

CHAPTER 22
INTERMEDIATE MAGIC (3)

After parting ways with Professor Robert, I immediately headed to the library.

"What book are you looking for?"

"Basic Dark Magic."

"Ah… Books on Basic Dark Magic can be found in Row T."

I easily acquired a book on Basic Dark Magic.

Although obtaining more advanced books required the permission of a professor, this was not the case for basic ones.

With the book in hand, I began to read slowly, taking in the fundamental theories of dark magic.

There were theories I was familiar with, and others that were entirely new to me.

Then, I came across a particularly notable section.

"Mental contamination…"

The phenomenon that had happened to Luna.

Mental contamination was the most representative risk of dark magic.

The risks of dark magic could be divided into two categories.

One was the use of some part of oneself, an object, or a being as a sacrifice.

This wasn't an immediate concern, as it required a higher level of magic to use.

The second risk was mental contamination, which had various types.

Mana explosion, like the one Luna experienced, was one of them, and there were cases of curses resulting from backlash.

These adverse effects occurred because the methods of using dark magic were entirely different from those of other magics.

Basic magic typically was like requiring a container to hold water.

When using the magic, one would decide how much to use and pour mana into the container.

When the container was full, the mana would automatically stop flowing.

It was akin to a modern automatic system.

However, dark magic was different.

When using dark magic, there was a predetermined container, and I had to personally pour the mana into it.

I had to manually control the mana.

If the mana overflowed, it would lead to mental contamination, and if there was not enough mana, the magic would not work properly.

This was the biggest drawback of dark magic.

"Is it a matter of… control?"

Dark magic was, therefore, magic that relied on control.

Those who had used a specific dark magic spell many times could handle it skillfully, treating it like ordinary magic.

However, those who had not would repeatedly struggle with mental contamination as they practiced, until they developed the necessary control.

But that was not the only drawback.

Even those who had frequently used a specific dark magic spell could falter

depending on the circumstances.

In a sudden situation, they might fail to control the amount of mana due to panic.

That was why many people shied away from dark magic.

Nevertheless, dark magic had powers that overshadowed all its drawbacks.

It boasted exceptional adaptability compared to other types of magic.

Overwhelming power and adaptability – that was the essence of dark magic.

* * *

The following day, during the magic practice class.

"Today's lesson ends here," announced Professor Cromwell as he closed his book.

As I began to gather my belongings, the professor approached me.

"Rudy Astria, I heard you made a bet with that Robert fellow?"

Upon hearing his question, Rie turned to look at me.

Ignoring Rie, I answered Professor Cromwell's question.

"Yes, sir. He demanded a condition in exchange for teaching me dark magic."

"Dark magic?" Rie reacted to my response once more.

Rie suddenly seemed embarrassed by her reaction and turned her head away, coughing to clear her throat.

Professor Cromwell glanced at her briefly before returning his attention to me.

"Well, it's your choice. You can handle it as you see fit. All right then, give it your best shot."

"Thank you, sir."

With that, Professor Cromwell left the classroom. As soon as he was out of sight, Rie scowled and spoke up.

"Hey! Dark magic?!"

That was just fine. I needed to ask Rie for a favor anyway.

"Well, that's how it turned out."

"Even now, just say you can't do it!"

"No," I replied firmly, causing Rie to clutch her head.

"I thought it'd be fun not knowing where you'd pop up, but it's quite annoying now that you're my ally…"

"I don't think I have that kind of erratic personality, do I?"

"Enough about that. Why do you want to learn dark magic? If you want to learn intermediate magic, just study ordinary spells. The Astria family has their own magic, doesn't it?"

That was true.

The Astria family had developed their own magic, passed down through generations.

But how long would I have to wait for that? It wouldn't matter how powerful my abilities became in the end if I died before acquiring them.

And there was no guarantee that I would inherit the Astria family magic.

In the original story, I might have learned some of it, but there was no certainty I would in this world.

"Since I've decided to learn it, I'm going to give it a try. If it doesn't feel right, I'll stop at that point."

"Fine… Just be careful not to suddenly die while using magic."

I stopped Rie as she tried to leave.

“…What is it?"

"I need your help with something."

"Me?" Rie stared at me incredulously.

I led Rie to the top student's laboratory.

“…What are we doing here?"

"You've dealt with people affected by mental corruption before."

I pulled out the Basic Dark Magic book from my bag.

"Wait, hold on… Hey…”

"What?"

"Are you saying you're going to use dark magic right here?"

"Yes, and if anything goes wrong, I need you to help me out."

For a brief moment, silence enveloped us.

Rie and I stood facing each other, neither of us saying a word.

It was Rie who broke the silence first, stealthily reaching for her bag.

There was only one reason for this movement.

Escape.

"Ah!"

Rie immediately bolted from the top student's laboratory.

I chased after her right away.

"Where do you think you're going?!"

"No! Wait until I send for Locke! Just wait until then!"

And so, after a short chase with Rie…

"Huff… huff…"

"I told you… whew… why run away?"

After about 10 minutes of pursuit, I finally managed to catch Rie. She took deep breaths, having been caught by me.

Regaining her composure, Rie shouted at me.

"No! Why do you always ask me to do these things?! I'm not an expert at this!"

"We're allies, aren't we? Help me out a bit."

"I told you last time, I'm a princess!"

"You said we were allies on equal terms."

Rie sprawled on the floor like a child demanding a toy from a department store.

I dragged her back to the top student's laboratory.

Truthfully, I wanted to ask Astina for help as well. But lately, she was so busy preparing for the midterm event that I couldn't bring myself to bother her.

Since the event was for first-year students, there was nothing I could do to help, so all I could do was offer my support.

That left me with only two people I could ask for assistance.

Luna and Rie.

I considered asking Luna for help but shook my head. My magic had surpassed Luna's by a significant margin.

If a mana explosion were to occur, Luna might not be able to handle it.

However, Rie was not only skilled in magic but also knew how to deal with elementals. That meant she could handle various situations.

I figured it didn't matter if I bothered her once or multiple times. I could make it up to her in a big way later.

"I don't want to go through all that trouble again."

Rie complained as she was being dragged.

"The magic I'll be using isn't that difficult, so the chances of a mana explosion are low."

Honestly, the backlash from mana explosions was quite rare. At most, a minor curse would be inflicted upon failure, or the mana would flow back, causing a slight pain.

"I hate it when things don't go according to plan!"

"Plan?"

"I have things to study and tasks to complete!"

I let go of the yelling Rie.

"Fine. I guess there's no helping it."

“…What?"

Upon releasing her, Rie gazed at me with a puzzled expression.

As urgent as I may be, I wouldn't be so cruel as to force someone who dislikes the idea to assist me.

However…

"But you should know one thing," I said.

"What now?" Rie retorted.

"From now on, I'll be practicing dark magic on my own."

"Fine. Go ahead!"

"However, there's a chance that something unsavory might happen. Dark magic is risky, after all…"

"Okay."

"Wouldn't that affect your grand plan?"

When I said that, Rie glared at me. I ignored her piercing stare and continued speaking.

"If I were to lose control of my mana while using dark magic… The dormitory would be turned upside down… My reputation would plummet into the abyss… And then…"

"Ugh… Don't you have any friends? You could ask someone else for help, you know!!!"

"Well, I don't have many friends, but you're trustworthy. The academy's third-best."

Hearing that, Rie sighed.

Although her face showed irritation, she seemed slightly pleased.

"Fine, I'll help."

"Thank you."

I smiled faintly.

* * *

"Urk…"

I had already attempted to cast the Abyssal Flame over ten times.

Not once had I succeeded.

And each failure came with backlash.

"Ugh… Water… Water…”

"My whole body…! It's itching…!"

I suffered through various curses and all sorts of pain.

"Haah… Haah…”

"Are you going to give up yet? It's agonizing just watching you."

"Could you at least look at me when you say that…?"

Rie had watched me cast magic once or twice, but she had since stopped observing me and focused on her own studies.

"I have no reason to learn dark magic. Watching you is just a waste of time."

"Fine… Go about your business."

I got up to try casting the spell again. At least I felt like I was getting the hang of it. The sensation of filling a vessel with mana had initially felt strange and unfamiliar.

However, after failing several times, I thought I began to understand the feeling.

I imagined a vessel before my eyes…

And slowly poured my mana into it. I had to handle my mana carefully.

Pouring it in too fast or too slow wouldn't work.

Just the right amount.

"Gah…!"

"What's wrong? Why are you making that face?"

"Cough… Cough… Uh… It's just a normal backlash."

Another failure. I thought I had gotten the hang of it, but success was still out of reach.

"Hmm…”

Rie glanced at me for a moment, then checked the time.   "It's about time for us to go, isn't it?"

It had already grown dark outside, and the hour was getting late.

"Yeah, I suppose so."

As I quickly tidied myself up, pain coursed through my entire body.

It felt like the aftermath of an intense workout I hadn't done before.

However, while that pain was more of a dull ache, this felt like being stabbed by a knife.

"It's not easy…”

I sighed. I had thought I'd be able to learn it today…

I had planned to learn dark magic as quickly as possible and prepare a few things before the midterm camp.

That was overconfidence on my part.

Lately, everything had been going according to plan, and I had grown overly confident. The real challenge would be from now on.

I had managed to persuade Rie to help me today, but I felt guilty asking her to do so again tomorrow.

Rie gathered her things and walked toward the door. She paused for a moment, glanced at me, and spoke up.

"Are you doing this again tomorrow?"

"What?"

"You said you needed me."

As I stared at her with a dumbfounded expression, Rie turned her head and opened the door.

"Come to the lab right after class tomorrow."

With that, she left the laboratory.

“…She's kinder than I thought?"

Initially, I had planned to plead with her, maybe even beg a little.

But her offer to help voluntarily made me even more grateful.

"I should treat her to something delicious later."

CHAPTER 23
INTERMEDIATE MAGIC (4)

"Good morning."

The next morning, I briefly stopped by the student council room.

I didn't have any particular business there, but it was my habit to visit once every morning.

"Ah… Rudy Astria…”

Astina greeted me. However, she wasn't the only one in the student council room. A silver-haired girl stood before Astina.

"Hello."

The girl slightly bowed her head in greeting to me.

"Ah, yes."

I returned the gesture with a slight nod of my own, and Astina began to speak.

"This is Yeniel, who transferred to the Swordsmanship Department today."

Yeniel… It seems the midterm camp is about to begin.

The story starts with the arrival of transfer student Yeniel.

The Rebels.

The Rebels were a group of individuals united against the corrupt nobles.

They sought to overthrow the emperor and his nobles to create a new world.

They were already moving outside the academy, though their actions had not yet

caught the public's attention.

However, that did not mean they were idle. The first event that would bring their existence to light would occur during the midterm camp.

They planned something within the midterm camp—a declaration of war against the nobles' leader and the emperor.

This involved the assassination of the Astria family's second son, me, and Rie Von Ristonia, the first in line for the imperial throne.

This event would mark the beginning of the main story, where Evan would become involved with Rie and Yeniel, and the world's greater currents would start to shift.

"The class will start soon. You know where the classroom is, right?"

"Yes, I'll be on my way now."

Yeniel bid Astina farewell and left the room. Astina then turned her gaze to me.

"You should go too. There's nothing for you to do here."

She said there was nothing to do, but there was a massive stack of documents piled on her desk.

It was probably work I couldn't do, so she said there was nothing. I looked at Astina with sympathy and opened my mouth.

"Take it easy. Don't overwork yourself."

"Hehe… I'd love to rest, but I have to finish my work first."

Astina laughed, but her words held a hint of bitterness. I glanced at her for a moment, then realized it was time to head to the classroom.

"Rudy Astria."

Astina called out to me as I was about to leave.

"And by the way, are you going to continue?"

“…Pardon me?"

Continue?

"The student council."

"…?"

"What's with that clueless expression?"

"Wasn't our agreement until the end of the midterm camp?"

Isn't that obvious?

Even though I know Astina is currently swamped with paperwork, there's no particular reason for me to continue being on the student council.

Once the midterm camp is over, the proper storyline will progress, and I won't have the time to devote to the student council.

I need to focus on my studies and improving my magic skills.

"We've already formed an alliance, so is there really a need for me to be on the student council?"

"You need to work. On student council matters."

"Aren't there plenty of others who would love to do it?"

There are countless students who would jump at the chance to be on the student council, shedding tears of joy.

So, why do I have to do it?

"Those kids are difficult for me to manage. And among those who want to do this kind of work, are there any normal ones? It's the ones who don't want to do it that do it well."

I glared at Astina as she spoke.

"Then, what about Locke? You can just boss him around."

"He's no fun."

So, am I fun…?

Astina casually crossed her legs as she leaned back in her chair.

"Well, if you're going to be like that, I have no choice but to force you."

"Force me?"

Force me to continue being on the student council?

"I helped you out in the library, remember? You can repay that debt by extending our agreement."

"…So that's how you're going to play it."

Of course, I knew I owed Astina a debt.

I had thought I would be able to repay it later, but I didn't expect her to bring it up like this.

"Trust is important in an alliance, you know?"

Astina said with a sinister smile.

"Can't you accept something else as repayment?"

"Nope."

"I'm really busy."

"So am I. Cut back on sleep."

Astina grinned, acting like a wicked supervisor. What should I do…?

I contemplated for a moment.

The best solution would be for me to help Astina in return.

Then Astina would owe me, and there would be no need for me to repay my debt.

However, the problem was whether such an opportunity would arise.

Many things happen during the midterm camp, but it wouldn't mean anything if I were the one to resolve them.

After all, it's Evan who needs to handle those situations and grow from them.

I glanced at the clock.

The start of class was drawing near.

This discussion won't end anytime soon, so I decided it was best to head to class.

“…Let's discuss this matter later. We'll renegotiate after the midterm camp."

"Fine, think about it carefully. See if there's any way you can avoid doing it."

I left the room with Astina waving her hand and smiling behind me.

* * *

After school.

"Phew…”

Rie was sitting at her desk, reading a book, while I practiced dark magic.

Now, even when I suffered from the backlash, Rie continued doing her own thing, only checking on me when I seemed to be particularly struggling.

At least today was better than yesterday.

Yesterday, I faced backlash every time I attempted to cast a spell.

But today, I had managed to cast a few spells successfully.

The problem was that they weren't complete spells - I had only used them with less mana, resulting in an incomplete casting.

"Once more…"

As I tried to cast the spell again, Rie spoke up.

"Hey."

She looked at me with a pitiful expression.

"Do you really want to learn dark magic that badly?"

Rie closed her book and stared at me directly.

"Honestly, if you've reached the level of intermediate magic at this point, you could learn any intermediate spell faster than others. But why are you so fixated on dark magic?"

"…"

Rie had a point.

I could have learned other types of magic by now and achieved great results.

However, whether I would be able to survive in the academy by learning other magic was a different question.

Could I fend off every threat that came my way?

Could I adapt to every situation, even if the story had changed?

I didn't think so.

In that case, I had to endure this pain and draw out my potential.

Though I already possessed outstanding abilities, I had to bear this to acquire even greater ones.

"I need to learn it to survive."

"To survive?"

Rie's expression turned sour.

I truly meant to survive, but it seemed Rie interpreted it as surviving in politics or within the Astria family.

"Sigh… Fine, do as you please. By the way, do you even know anything about Professor Robert?"

"Professor Robert?"

I wondered why she suddenly brought up Professor Robert.

"Isn't he the only dark magic professor at the academy? And from a commoner background…"

"He is the only dark magic professor, but he's not from a commoner background."

I furrowed my brow at Rie's words.

"What do you mean, he's not from a commoner background? Then why doesn't he have a title?"

It was a bit odd.

Even if he was a professor specializing in dark magic, he was still an exceptional wizard.

Usually, someone like him would at least be granted a noble title, even if they didn't possess any lands.

But that wasn't the case for Professor Robert.

"Professor Robert was originally a wizard from a noble family with land."

Rie continued her explanation at a measured pace.

"However, he offered his own son as a sacrifice to save himself. Because of that, the empire stripped him of his territory and noble title."

“…His son?"

He offered his own son as a sacrifice?

"Isn't that just a rumor?"

Professor Robert didn't seem like that kind of person.

Judging by how well he got along with Professor Cromwell, he didn't appear to be a bad person.

"Are you suggesting my information is on the same level as mere gossip?"

Rie spoke as if she were offended.

Her words held true.

Although she was currently attending the academy like an ordinary student, she was, after all, the Empire's First Princess.

Her information was far beyond mere rumors.

If such a rumor existed, I should have discovered it while investigating Professor Robert.

However, I hadn't found any such rumors.

In other words, Rie's information was high-level intelligence, not just ordinary gossip.

"Think carefully. About learning dark magic and becoming Professor Robert's apprentice."

* * *

A few days later, during lunchtime.

"By now, he must have learned it," mused Robert, reclined on a garden bench, gazing up at the cloudless sky.

The warm sunlight bathed his face, casting a gentle glow.

He contemplated Rudy Astria as he lay there.

The young man's talent was undoubtedly extraordinary, so much so that Robert, a professor, desired him as his disciple.

However, that was all.

Dark magic was not ordinary magic.

It was a magic learned by chiseling away at one's bones and burning one's flesh.

It was not a magic befitting a young master like Rudy.

There was even a saying that dark magic was a magic learned by those without talent.

Those who could not bridge the gap in talent with others resorted to sacrificing their own bodies to make up for it.

Rudy Astria had no need for such measures.

Exceptional talent.

An illustrious family.

Aside from his social skills, there was nothing lacking.

Thus, there was no reason for him to endure the pain of learning dark magic.

That was why Robert had made the proposal.

In truth, Robert could have taught him Abyssal Flame in just one day.

He possessed the necessary techniques and tricks.

However, he deliberately refrained from doing so.

Rudy Astria must have felt it - the immense pain that accompanied learning dark

magic.

Robert made this proposal to let him feel that.

For someone of Rudy Astria's caliber, learning basic dark magic was only a matter of time.

He would master it in the blink of an eye.

However, he would also realize there was no need to endure such pain to learn this magic.

Moreover, Robert had heard that lately, Rudy Astria had been getting close to Princess Rie.

"In that case, he's even less likely to come," he thought.

Most people at the academy were unaware of Robert's past.

Cromwell knew, having grown up with him, but apart from the headmaster and Cromwell, nobody knew.

Yet, Princess Rie might.

It was an incident that most people didn't care to dig into, but if she wanted to find out, she could easily do so.

-Ah… Dad?

Memories of the past suddenly surfaced, and Robert furrowed his brow.

"Ah~ the weather is bloody lovely," he muttered.

"Why would you say it's bloody when the weather is nice?" a voice asked.

"Damn! You startled me!" Robert looked in the direction of the voice.

"Hey, make some noise when you approach. You're not an assassin or anything…" he grumbled.

It was Rudy Astria, standing there with a book in hand.

"I simply walked up normally. I couldn't exactly sprint toward you while shouting your name, now could I, Professor Robert?" Rudy said calmly.

Robert glanced at Rudy for a moment, sighed, and got to the point. "Alright, enough of that. What do you want?"

"I've learned Abyssal Flame," Rudy announced confidently.

"Alright, and so what?" Robert retorted.

"What do you mean?"

Professor Robert was baffled by Rudy's statement.

He had assumed that Rudy would, of course, refuse to learn dark magic.

"Didn't you say you would teach me dark magic?"

“…What?"

Robert looked at Rudy with a dumbfounded expression.

"Ah, do I need to show you?"

With that, Rudy Astria looked at his own hand.

"Abyssal Flame."

As Rudy's mana flowed, a black flame sprouted from his hand.

It was the basics of dark magic, the Abyssal Flame.

It had been cast precisely, with no backlash, and the size of the magic was just right.

"Is this sufficient?"

Robert stared at the magic.

It didn't feel like Rudy had succeeded only once or twice.

Amateur magic had a certain quality, but this spell seemed to have been honed and practiced numerous times.

"Did someone teach you about dark magic?"

"…? Is there someone who could teach me dark magic?"

Rudy responded to Professor Robert's question with another question.

He had a point.

There were a few individuals at the Academy who knew how to use dark magic, but they were not ones Rudy Astria would know.

If Rudy had learned it alone and was using it so proficiently, then…

"When did you first use it?"

"Perhaps… two or three days ago. I could use it, but it seemed a bit clumsy, so I practiced a bit before coming."

"Ha…!"

Professor Robert was astonished.

While he had expected Rudy to learn quickly, he hadn't imagined that he would practice on his own.

What kind of resolve drove this young man?

"Good grief."

Robert rose from his seat and walked forward.

As Rudy watched him with a puzzled expression, Professor Robert briefly turned his head.

"What are you doing? Let's go eat."

"What about the dark magic?"

"What do you mean, 'what about'? You asked to learn, so I'll teach you."

At Robert's words, a faint smile formed on Rudy's lips. He followed and spoke up.

"Shall we go to that restaurant we visited last time?"

Hearing that, Professor Robert looked at Rudy Astria and laughed incredulously.

He liked the food that other professors and students wouldn't even bring near their mouths.

And he wanted to learn dark magic from Robert.

“…You're truly an enigma."

"I've been hearing that a lot lately. They say I'm an unpredictable guy."

CHAPTER 24
MIDTERM CAMP (1)

The carriage rattled as it traveled through the dense forest.

Aboard the carriage were the students of the academy.

Midterm Camp.

It was not only the game's first event but also the first event experienced by the first-year students after joining Liberion Academy.

Liberion Academy's midterm camp was quite different from the typical modern camp event.

It was not a mere event where they would make curry and laugh together with friends.

The apparent objective of midterm camp was survival.

An event where students were dropped off in a dense forest and had to survive for a week.

That was Liberion Academy's midterm event.

Of course, after enduring a week, the last day was spent gathering at a mansion in the middle of the forest to relieve the students' fatigue.

Everyone struggled for a week, eagerly awaiting the final day.

There was only one intention behind organizing such an activity at the academy.

Cooperation.

Competition was the norm within the academy.

Each student's rank was determined for that reason, and all other activities were nothing but competition.

However, there was no rule that stated they must always compete when they entered society.

There would be times when they needed to cooperate with someone and times when they needed to coexist.

That was why such events were designed to teach students the value of cooperation.

"Haah…"

"Rudy, are you alright?"

As I sighed, Luna, who was sitting beside me, looked at me with a worried expression.

"Ah, I'm fine."

However, there was a problem.

The original game's story had already been twisted.

The reason cooperation was necessary during the midterm event was that four teammates had to survive together.

The four had to work together to withstand the magical beasts for a week, securing food and living space.

But, the teams had changed.

"Hehe…"

In front of me, Rie was smiling happily, while Locke sat with an emotionless expression.

In other words, my current team consisted of Rie, Luna, and Locke – four of us in total.

However, the original story wasn't like this.

Rie should have definitely been in the same team as Evan.

I should have been placed with the delinquents.

But, I had no idea how this combination was formed.

Upon further thought, it was an absurd combination.

I was currently the second seat of the academy, Rie ranked third, and Luna was fifth.

Although grades were not everything in survival, it was a fact that in a forest where they had to withstand magical beasts' attacks, better grades were advantageous.

Overbalance.

That's how one could describe our team.

Even if our group was arranged like this, a single question lingered in my mind.

Just who was in Evan's group?

Originally, Evan's group consisted of the transfer student Yeniel, Rie, and the elementalist Serina Rinsburg.

Together, the four of them formed a group.

With Rie missing from the original four, someone must have taken her place.

However, the identity of that person wasn't particularly important.

The problem was that Rie was sitting right in front of me.

Her meaningful smile was suspicious from the start.

I stared at Rie intently before speaking.

"Rie, you did this, didn't you?"

"What do you mean~? I honestly have no idea."

Rie replied with a sly expression.

It was almost certain that she was the culprit.

In the game, when she was in the same group as Evan, she would make cryptic remarks as though she had intervened in the group formation.

I knew this fact, but I never imagined she would use it like this.

Had getting closer to Rie lately caused this problem…?

It was a bit strange.

Rie and Evan hadn't interacted much.

Rie should have shown some interest in Evan, but she showed none at all.

In truth, I was somewhat aware of this situation.

Since I hadn't seen Rie interacting with Evan, I casually asked her what she thought of him.

-Evan? I don't know. I'm not interested.

I thought that even if she said this, she would at least investigate and keep an eye on him.

It was surprising that someone with no background had suddenly become top of the class, so wouldn't she be at least interested?

But she genuinely had no interest at all.

This was no small issue.

The incident that would take place during the midterm camp.

Not only did it involve an assassination attempt on me, but there was also one on Rie.

And both attempts would be thwarted by Evan.

Although the incidents occurred at different times, it wasn't a good thing for the two of us to be together like this.

Because we were both targets, they might try to attack us at the same time.

In Rudy Astria's case, he was alone when the assassination attempt occurred, but in Rie's case, the incident happened while she was with Evan.

But if they were not in the same group, then there would be no reason for Evan to be with Rie.

The more I thought about it, the more my head hurt.

I had prepared enough power to protect myself, so I was relatively safe.

However, Rie was not.

Moreover, Evan needed to save Rie to receive a significant reward, and that was another problem.

"Ah…"

"Rudy, are you really okay? Should I call a professor?"

Luna took a stone out of her pocket.

That stone was a summoning stone capable of calling a professor.

It was an item distributed to all members to summon professors or student council members in case of an emergency.

I looked at Luna and smiled faintly.

"It's really alright. I just have a few things on my mind."

"Oh…?"

Suddenly, Luna reached out and placed her hand on my forehead.

"Huh?"

Seeing this, Rie's eyes widened. I was taken aback by Luna's unexpected action as well.

"You don't seem to have a fever…”

Luna tilted her head as she kept her hand on my forehead.

“…Huh?"

As we all stared at Luna with bewildered expressions, she seemed to realize what she had done.

"Ah, I'm sorry! I was just worried, and… um…!"

Luna hastily drew back her hand and grew flustered.

Just as she was about to offer an explanation…

Thud.

"We've arrived. You can disembark now."

The coachman's voice echoed from outside.

We stepped out of the carriage and into the open air.

The first thing we saw was a tree, followed by more trees.

We were in a dense forest.

However, the place where we stood wasn't completely forest, but a suitable spot for a camp.

Was this barren landscape where we were supposed to survive?

"I'll be off now."

The coachman left, guiding the carriage back down the road. Once the situation had

settled, Luna approached me with an apologetic expression.

"Rudy, about that…"

I reassured her, saying, "No, it's not like you did anything terribly wrong.

Friends do that sort of thing, right? It's my fault for causing you to worry."

"Friends…"

Luna mulled over my words, gazing at me.

"Hey, Rudy!"

Rie called out to me while Luna and I were talking.

"Yeah?"

"Let's go check out the surroundings."

Rie pointed towards the forest. Her sudden suggestion caught me off guard.

"…Right now?"

"Follow me if I say follow."

Though I was baffled, I moved nonetheless, suspecting she must have something important to say.

"I'll go with Rie to explore the area for a bit."

"Alright…"

I left Luna behind and walked towards Rie.

She said nothing more and headed into the forest.

After a short walk, Rie turned around to look at me.

"Hey, what's your relationship with her?"

I frowned at her abrupt question.

"What are you talking about all of a sudden?"

"What's your relationship with her?"

"Luna? We're friends."

Luna and I were naturally close friends, weren't we?

Best friends.

She was my only friend in the Academy.

Of course, I was also friendly with Rie, but our relationship felt more like a business arrangement than a friendship.

However, I merely referred to Luna as a friend, fearing that calling her my best friend might make her uncomfortable.

"Hmm…"

Rie stroked her chin and eyed me with a hint of suspicion.

More than that, I was curious about something.

"Hey, what's the deal with these group members?"

"Ah, the group? I talked to senior Astina about it. Honestly, it's uncomfortable to be with strangers."

Rie spoke as if it were a matter of course.

"Is that allowed?"

"Even if the midterm event evaluation affects our grades, it's only a small part. No one really cares about this kind of thing as it's just a formality."

Rie snickered at my concern.

"You're more timid than I thought. Shaking just because of this."

"There's no harm in being cautious, right?"

I worried that a misstep could lead to disciplinary action and a headache.

"Don't worry. I heard there are other students who requested similar arrangements. Even the professors turned a blind eye."

Rie's words eased my concerns a bit.

However, it was surprising to learn that there were others who had made similar requests. Did they just ask to be with their friends?

"So, you arranged this entire group?"

"Yep, I just picked people I'm comfortable with."

Her response took me by surprise.

"Were you friends with Luna?"

I hadn't seen Rie and Luna interacting in the game, so it was unexpected that Rie found her comfortable.

"Well, she's the girl I saved, so we have some kind of bond."

Rie spoke nonchalantly. It was indeed more comfortable for me to have the group arranged this way.

I wished Rie had been in Evan's group though, but that was a minor regret.

Still, being in the same group, I thought I might be able to create events similar to the game.

"Ugh…!"

Rie stretched her arms.

She took a deep breath, inhaling and exhaling, and then opened her mouth.

"Coming into the forest like this does feel healing."

Rie looked at ease, which was palpable to me.

She usually played the role of the kind princess, hiding behind a mask.

Today, however, her face seemed genuinely relaxed.

"But it doesn't seem like we'll always be this comfortable."

Rie gestured towards my back.

"Grr…"

Behind me, about three kobolds were scouting the area.

"Shall we relieve some stress?"

With that, Rie summoned her elemental.

"Sylph, cut them down."

* * *

In a shadowy chamber, two men stood.

"So, what have we decided to do?" asked one, his face concealed by a hood.

"For now, we'll proceed as planned. We'll take care of Rudy Astria first, and then target the princess amid the ensuing chaos."

"Very well, I'll tell Yeniel to move on the fifth night."

"No, Garwel is with Yeniel. Relay the message to him instead."

The other man nodded. "I shall do as you say."

"For the cause."

"Yes, for the future."

With that, the first man vanished, leaving the hooded figure alone in the darkness.

"How convenient it is that our targets are together," he murmured with a sinister chuckle.

CHAPTER 25
MIDTERM CAMP (2)

While Rudy and Rie were surveying the surroundings, Luna and Locke prepared the campsite where we had stopped.

They gathered nearby branches to build a campfire, and Luna went to collect fruit, while Locke went to hunt for game.

Luna collected a decent amount of fruit from the area and set it aside.

As a child, she had often picked fruit from nearby trees, so it was easy for her to identify which ones were edible.

"Is this enough?"

Luna gazed at the fruit she had gathered with a satisfied smile.

"I wonder when Rudy will be back…"

Among their group, Luna felt a bit awkward with everyone except Rudy.

She found it difficult to approach Princess Rie due to her high status and the somewhat intimidating aura she emitted.

Though the atmosphere was different from when they were at the academy, it was still hard to take the initiative and engage with her.

Furthermore, being in the same space as Locke was incredibly awkward due to their previous conflict.

As Luna absentmindedly stared in the direction where Rudy had disappeared, she suddenly thought of Ena and Riku.

"I wonder how Ena and Riku are doing…?"

She was worried about them.

Her own group felt a bit uncomfortable, but they were all skilled individuals.

There was hardly any chance they would fail.

Honestly, having Rudy, Rie, or herself in a group would almost guarantee success, and having all three together made it a certain.

Ena and Riku should have also been in good groups…

"But, did they do this on purpose…?"

Luna tilted her head in thought.

She wondered if they had deliberately placed the high-achieving students in one group to compare the lower-performing ones separately.

In reality, if a group had even one outstanding student, their chances of surviving a week would be much higher, making it difficult for lower-performing students to be fairly evaluated.

That's why she suspected they had grouped the top students separately from the others.

This arrangement was good for Luna in terms of grades.

Though it was uncomfortable having awkward relationships, she would have been paired with strangers anyway, so this group was still preferable.

"Still, I'm glad Rudy is here…”

Rudy was as comfortable to be around as Riku and Ena, if not more so.

With a faint smile, Luna gazed at the fruit she had gathered.

"There's nothing to do…”

As I waited briefly, various voices reached my ears.

"How could you do that?!"

"What does it matter? They would all end up dead anyway."

Looking in the direction of the voices, she saw Rie and Rudy bickering as they approached.

Luna was about to greet Rudy warmly but stopped upon seeing them arguing.

'Uh… '

Rudy noticed Luna first and greeted her.

"Ah, Luna, we're back."

"Uh, yeah! Good job!"

Luna smiled in response to Rudy's greeting.

"What are all these fruits?"

Rie's attention was immediately drawn to the fruits behind Luna.

"Oh, I found a few familiar fruit trees nearby, so I picked some."

"Wow, you know about these?"

Rie asked Luna in a friendly manner.

"Yep… I ate them when I was little, picking them straight from the trees."

"You've picked and eaten fruits straight from trees?"

Rie looked at Luna with a surprised expression.

'Uh… '

Seeing Rie's astonished face made Luna feel a bit awkward.

It made sense since Rie and Luna came from different worlds.

There was no way the Empire's princess would have ever picked and eaten fruit from trees.

"There are many fruits I've never seen before."

Rie looked at the fruits curiously.

Rudy seemed interested too, as he examined the fruits from behind.

They were grown on trees in the forest, so they weren't high-quality fruits.

As a result, Rie was seeing all of them for the first time.

She had rarely eaten them herself, aside from when she was young.

"Ha… haha…”

Luna laughed awkwardly, realizing the difference between her and Rie.

Well… it was surprising that she had become this close to Rudy. Rudy's world was also different.

"Wow, I haven't seen this in a long time."

"Do you know this fruit too?"

At that moment, Rudy leaned down to pick up a small fruit.

"Is this a cherry?"

Luna's eyes widened in surprise.

"Rudy, how did you know?"

"Huh? I just saw a tree nearby when I was little… Ah."

Rudy suddenly stopped talking, then paused to think for a moment before speaking again.

“…I saw it in a book."

Rudy quickly changed his story.

“…You suddenly saw it in a book?"

Rie stared at Rudy with a bewildered expression.

"Anyway, I saw it in a book."

Rudy insisted, then immediately popped the cherry into his mouth.

"Uh…? Rudy, you should wash it before eating… And the pit is quite big…!"

For those eating cherries for the first time, biting into the pit could damage their teeth.

Luna tried to warn him of this fact.

"Hm?"

However, Rudy skillfully picked out the seed and spat it onto the ground.

“…You said it was your first time eating it."

Realizing what Rie had said, Rudy paused to think.

"I thought that might be how to eat it. So I just went for it."

"You just guessed on your first try?"

As Rie asked this, Rudy made a cheeky expression.

"Isn't human intuition amazing?"

Seeing his grin, Rie sighed as if giving up.

"By the way, where did Locke go?"

Rie asked Luna as she scanned the area.

"Um… he said he went hunting…”

"Hunting?"

As if on cue, they heard the sound of something being dragged from far away.

Locke walked towards them, his face smeared with blood.

"What's he up to now…"

Rie muttered to herself, but Rudy and Luna were thinking the same thing.

In one hand, Locke held a bloodstained sword, and in the other, he dragged a dead boar.

"It's dinner."

With that, Locke sheathed his sword at his waist.

"You caught a boar with just a sword?"

Rudy's incredulous expression was shared by Luna.

How could an ordinary person catch a boar with a sword?

Seeing their expressions, Rie spoke up with a smile.

"Tonight, we can have a feast. We might eat even better than at the Academy, right?"

Luna couldn't find the words to continue.

It truly felt like they would eat better than at the Academy.

Although they were all nobles and surviving would be easy, she thought there would be issues related to actual survival skills.

Surprisingly, they seemed to be more suited for this kind of survival than anything else.

"I'll prepare the boar."

Locke carried the boar behind some trees.

"Let's start a fire and prepare to cook."

"Right!"

Just as Rudy and Luna were about to start, Rie sneakily stepped back.

"I fought the monsters, so I'll take a break."

As Rie tried to head into the forest, Rudy grabbed her collar.

"You didn't do that much. Go make a place to store those fruits."

"Ugh…"

Rie glared at Rudy while he held her collar.

"Got it?"

"Grrr…"

Rie clenched her teeth and replied to Rudy.

It was the first time Luna had seen Rie react like this.

She was always confident and outspoken, but in front of Rudy, she couldn't even budge.

It was intriguing.

"Luna, let's prepare the fire and get ready to eat."

Hearing Rudy's words, Luna grinned.

"Alright!"

* * *

It was night,

Summer was approaching, making the weather warmer, but the forest still had a

slight chill to it.

Nonetheless, it wasn't cold enough to catch a cold, and it wasn't uncomfortable either.

We had even prepared a campfire, so there shouldn't be any problems.

We tidied up our surroundings and gathered around the campfire.

"Since it's our first day and we're tired, let's go to bed early."

"Alright. Wake me up later."

Rie and Locke laid down on the ground after saying that. We decided to take turns keeping watch at night. If everyone fell asleep, we wouldn't be able to respond to a sudden monster attack, so a night watch was essential.

If only we had learned alarm magic that would alert us when monsters approached, it would have been more convenient.

However, since no one knew how to use alarm magic yet, we had no choice but to keep watch.

For now, since it was the first day and we were unfamiliar with the forest's conditions, Luna and I decided to keep watch together.

When we got tired, we would wake up Rie and Locke to take over.

Rie and Locke laid down in their spots.

She shifted her body, seemingly uncomfortable with the ground.

"Ugh… It's so hard. How can anyone sleep here?"

Despite her grumbling, Rie fell asleep within ten minutes, though tossing and turning.

It hadn't even been a full day, but after riding in the carriage for so long and preparing the base camp, she must have been exhausted.

I quietly stared at the crackling fire.

Like I had mentioned when we went out to explore with Rie, coming to this place felt refreshing.

I had only studied at the academy, so I had never felt this relaxed…

My body and mind felt drowsy, with the tension released and a warm campfire in front of me.

Earlier, my guard had been down, so I ended up talking about cherries.

I remembered picking and eating cherries from a tree near my home when I was young, so I had instinctively acted on it.

I made an excuse, thinking 'Rudy Astria' wouldn't have eaten cherries, but no one seemed to care, so we moved on.

I made a mental note that letting my guard down could create such slip-ups.

But I couldn't always be on edge.

I was constantly on guard at the academy, so shouldn't I occasionally allow myself to relax?

Of course, in a few days, I would need to be on high alert again, but right now, I wanted to enjoy this moment without worrying.

As I was lost in thought, Luna spoke up.

"They seem like nice people, better than I expected…"

"Huh?"

Luna sat with her legs crossed, looking at me and smiling.

"Rie and Locke, they both seem like good people. Even though they're of high status, they're kind…"

She was right.

Rie had done as I asked, and Locke, on the other hand, had taken the initiative to get things done without being told.

Moreover, Locke seemed familiar with this kind of lifestyle and shared his experiences, explaining what needed to be done.

As a result, I didn't have much to do, and I could finally relax.

"Ah… of course, I think Rudy is the kindest!"

"Ha ha… thank you."

I gave Luna a faint smile as I spoke.

"When I first came to the Academy, I thought people of high status would be on a different level than me."

"Really?"

"Yeah, but it turns out everyone's just like me. Hehe…"

Luna tilted her head and rested her face on her arm. I looked at her and smiled softly.

"Well, people's lives are all pretty similar."

There was no big reason for the lives of high-ranking nobles to be drastically different.

Of course, there might be some small differences, but if you looked at the big picture, they would all be quite alike.

Similar experiences, childhood stories…

"By the way, it looked like there were some cherries left earlier. Want to eat them together?"

"Sounds good."

Luna brought the cherries over and sat down near me.

We each picked up a cherry and popped it into our mouths.

"It's so sweet… hehe."

Luna kept eating cherries as she spoke.

Watching her, I smiled faintly and reached my hand out toward the bonfire, muttering to myself.

Seeing this, Luna also stretched her hand towards the bonfire.

"It's warm…"

"Yeah…"

Relying on the warmth and light of the bonfire, the night deepened.

CHAPTER 26
MIDTERM CAMP (3)

It was the fifth day of our wilderness training.

Rie looked around, stroking her chin.

"Living out here wouldn't be so bad, huh?"

I agreed with her statement.

The remnants of a roasted wild boar and eaten fish skewers littered the ground, and a makeshift bed made from gathered grass caught our eyes.

Various other tools and contraptions had been made for our convenience.

Crude as they were, these devices served their purpose well.

Locke had been responsible for creating all of these.

When preparing for wilderness training, we had the option to bring a few tools with us.

I had never been camping before, so I had only brought a few books to study and a couple of temporary scrolls.

Luna had done similarly, while Rie hadn't brought anything at all.

But Locke was different.

He had packed an array of tools necessary for survival, from mundane items like rope to more advanced tools such as a hammer.

As a result, our experience felt more like a relaxing camping trip than a test of survival.

Rie glanced at the various tools before looking at Luna.

"Luna! Let's go wash up by the river."

"Uh…? Oh, sure! Let's go together!"

Luna, who had been reading a book, looked up with a bright smile in response.

One notable change during our camping adventure was that Rie and Luna had become much closer.

It was nearly impossible not to bond after spending five days together in a place like this.

I watched Luna and Rie head towards the river, then stood up.

"Hey, Locke. I'm going to take a walk around the area."

"Alright."

With that, I rose and headed into the forest.

It was time to start preparing.

Yeniel would be coming to assassinate me soon. I wasn't sure how it would happen.

In the game, the events unfolded from Evan's perspective, so I didn't know the process leading to the assassination attempt.

However, I did know one fact.

When Yeniel tried to assassinate Rudy Astria, Evan discovered the plot and stopped Yeniel.

As a result, the assassination failed.

Instead, Evan defeated Yeniel and uncovered her true identity.

For the subsequent events to proceed correctly, this storyline needed to play out.

All I needed to do was hold out until Evan arrived.

As long as I kept that in mind, there shouldn't be any major issues.

But I absolutely could not lose.

Defeat would mean certain death. My goal was to hold out until Evan arrived, then feign defeat.

Evan would then step in and win against Yeniel.

With these thoughts in mind, I surveyed the surroundings, familiarizing myself with the terrain.

I needed to find a spot that was good for holding out during a fight, with minimal variables, and easily discoverable by others.

I searched for such a location.

"Hmm… This seems like the best spot…"

I found a sunny area with few trees as I looked around.

There weren't many trees, so it would be difficult for people to hide, and the lack of slopes made it less prone to surprises.

"Should we settle here then…"

"What are you settling here for?"

I quickly turned my head at the sudden voice and prepared to cast a spell.

"Who's-"

When I looked behind me, I saw a familiar face.

A woman with her red hair neatly tied up.

"Astina, senior?"

Astina was smiling behind me.

"You seem to be doing better than I thought. You look fine."

Astina joked with a smile, and I responded with a faint smile.

"Thanks to Locke, I've been able to live comfortably."

"Locke… that guy grew up under the Northern Marquis, so he has plenty of experience in situations like this. He's probably been through worse."

The Northern Marquis?

Is she talking about Locke's father?

"Do you know the Northern Marquis?"

"I've only heard stories. What about the others?"

"They're resting at the base camp over there. Would you like to see them?"

"No, I didn't come to see their faces."

Then, I couldn't help but wonder.

"But how did you get here? Shouldn't you be in the center of the forest?"

Normally, second-year student council members would be waiting in the building at the center of the forest.

They were usually just hanging out there, but they were also prepared for any unforeseen circumstances.

"I had to deal with an unpleasant situation."

"An unpleasant situation?"

As I expressed my curiosity, Astina answered.

"Someone has infiltrated the forest."

"Infiltrated…"

"It was just one person, but some of the student council members and professors are currently investigating."

Upon hearing this, I could feel danger approaching.

The tension that had loosened for a while started to tighten around me again.

However, part of me felt relieved that the story was progressing just like the game.

"There haven't been any major issues, so we're continuing as planned. But if anything happens, we're ready to stop immediately. You guys should be careful too. If something happens, use the summoning stone to call the professors."

"Understood."

I nodded in response to Astina's words.

"It doesn't look like there's anything here, so I'll be going. Good luck."

With that, Astina waved and disappeared into the forest.

"Intruder…"

It must have been a member of the Rebels.

At least, it seemed like things were unfolding as expected.

I couldn't let my guard down tonight.

With that thought in mind, I returned to where everyone was.

* * *

As night fell,

"Rudy, Rie, I took a long nap today, so if you're tired, wake me up early."

Today, Rie and I were assigned the first night watch, followed by Locke and Luna.

Once Locke and Luna had fallen asleep, Rie looked at me.

"Hey, I'm going to sleep too. If anything happens, wake me up."

Rie said that before lying down, but I grabbed her wrist and forcibly pulled her up.

"Get up."

"Ugh! Nothing's going to happen! Even if a few monsters show up, you can handle them alone."

"Get up now."

I continued to pull her up and pester her until she grumbled and sat back down.

"Sigh, I should've paired up with Locke for tonight's watch. If I left it to him, I could sleep peacefully."

"Don't try to cut corners."

I wouldn't have minded letting her rest a little under normal circumstances, but today, I couldn't allow it.

In the current situation, when we didn't know what threats might come, it would be too difficult to protect everyone on my own.

After some bickering, we silently stared at the fire. Then, Rie opened her mouth.

"Luna's a good kid."

And she smiled.

"She's so kind it's almost foolish. I'm glad we rescued her."

Rie wore a contented smile as she looked at the sleeping Luna.

"I never thought I could make a friend. But somehow, I did."

Rie echoed Luna's sentiments.

Luna, who thought she couldn't be friends with those of higher status, and Rie, who couldn't make friends because of her high status.

They had opposite yet similar situations.

"Things will be more fun when we return to the Academy."

Rustle-

While Rie was talking, we heard movement from the bushes behind us.

However, we couldn't see anything from where we were.

"Is it just an animal?"

Rie tilted her head and asked. I slowly began to feel a sense of danger.

Was it Yeniel?

"I'll go take a look."

"Alright, be careful~."

Rie cheerfully waved at me.

"Don't fall asleep. Keep your eyes wide open."

"Yep~ Got it~."

I approached the playful Rie and grabbed her shoulder, speaking seriously.

"Stay alert. If anything happens, shout loudly and use the summoning stone to call the others."

“…Why are you suddenly like this?"

As I spoke seriously, she frowned, sensing that the atmosphere was unusual.

"Right now, there's an intruder in this forest. I'm worried about potential dangers, so follow my instructions."

"An intruder…?"

Rie's expression darkened abruptly.

"Should we wake up Luna and Locke and have them come with us?"

I shook my head at Rie's suggestion.

That scenario shouldn't happen.

First, it was essential to create a connection between Evan and Yeniel.

Later, the key to stopping the rebels would lie in that relationship.

So, I had to go on an adventure to help establish a connection between Yeniel and Evan.

Of course, it wasn't a life-threatening adventure.

I wasn't that weak, and with the summoning stone, I planned to use it if things got too dangerous.

"I'll just scout the situation and come back. If something happens, I'll shout for help, and you can come to my aid."

"How about taking an elemental with you?"

"Then you won't be able to protect yourself. Just have the elementals guard the perimeter for now."

When I said that, Rie nodded slightly and opened her mouth.

“…Be careful."

I listened to Rie's farewell and slowly walked towards the bushes.

"Ignite."

I used magic to create light, brightening my field of vision.

If someone attacked from a blind spot, I'd be powerless.

So, it was crucial to make it as bright as possible to improve visibility.

Then, I cautiously moved to the location I had seen earlier.

Astina said there was only one intruder.

This meant that not all the rebels around here had moved yet.

In the game's current state, numerous rebels were lurking around this forest.

They were planning to assassinate me and, amid the chaos, ambush the students and professors as they fled the forest.

Assassinating Rie through a surprise attack.

That was the grand scheme they had in mind.

Rustle-

I reached out in the direction of the moving sound.

I saw a rabbit passing through the bushes.

"A rabbit…?"

I immediately made a judgment upon seeing the rabbit.

There was someone here.

I suddenly noticed a black object approaching.

I quickly threw my body to the side to avoid it.

"Ugh…!"

Rabbits aren't nocturnal creatures.

It's unusual for them to be active at dawn like this.

I quickly stood up and focused on the dark figure approaching me.

A masked individual with a slender build.

There was no doubt; it was Yeniel.

The person gave me no chance to react, charging towards me again.

However, I had prepared something this time.

"Wind Cutter!"

I instantly cast my spell at the attacker.

They ducked swiftly to avoid my magic.

Immediately after, they leaped forward.

Such a large movement was bound to leave openings.

Charging right after dodging my attack was the exact response I had anticipated.

I hadn't been wasting my time even after midterms.

I also studied how to counter Yeniel.

Locke had been my training partner.

Though assassins and swordsmen were undoubtedly different, I believed their fundamental movements were similar, so I asked him for a duel.

After a few matches, I had a decent grasp of the fundamentals.

To gain the upper hand against my opponent, I needed to induce their carelessness and predict their movements.

Since the assassin was in the dark, they'd likely feel at an advantage and be off guard.

The question was, how could I predict their next action?

After much thought, I came to one conclusion.

There was no need to predict.

All I had to do was lead their movements myself.

To manipulate their actions, I relied on this tactic: dodging small spells and baiting a charge towards me.

It was the easiest movement to provoke.

Especially when the opponent was in a hurry, it was even easier to induce.

I recalled my practice sessions.

Magic I had practiced while enduring pain.

I shouted at Yeniel as she charged at me.

"Abyssal Flame."

A black flame shot from my hand.

"Argh!"

Yeniel tried to dodge the flame, but she couldn't avoid it completely.

The flame hit her arm squarely, and she rolled on the ground, severely injured.

"Ugh…"

Yeniel let out a faint groan.

Gritting my teeth, I got back on my feet and reached out to the fallen Yeniel, preparing my magic in anticipation of his return.

"…?"

But Yeniel didn't move.

"Huh?"

I looked at the fallen Yeniel with a baffled expression.

"What… what's going on?"

I was flustered.

I didn't let my guard down and continued to watch Yeniel.

But there was no movement.

No way, right?

Could it be?

I stared at Yeniel like that for a few minutes.

Finally, I came to a conclusion.

That's right.

I had defeated Yeniel in one move.

No, I had used this combination technique against Locke too, and he had handled it well.

Even when he was attacked, he had been prepared to counter immediately.

Of course, the magic I used then wasn't Abyssal Flame.

But still… even so…

It wasn't supposed to end after just one hit, was it?

I didn't come here thinking I'd win.

But somehow, I won in a single round. I was dumbfounded.

"Is… is she dead?"

As I approached Yeniel, it seemed she was still breathing, her back rising and falling.

"…"

I stood silently, staring at the fallen Yeniel.

What should I do now?

Of course, I had put in tremendous effort to become stronger and adapt to this situation.

That's why I learned dark magic.

I heard that dark magic was powerful, but I didn't know it would be this strong.

The difference between Abyssal Flame and ordinary fire magic was the amount of pain inflicted.

While ordinary fire magic caused burns, Abyssal Flame inflicted immense pain upon the person hit.

Although it didn't cause severe physical damage, it was a technique that delivered a mental shock due to the pain.

It seemed Yeniel had fainted from the agony.

"Yeniel!"

Suddenly, a voice rang out from somewhere.

It was Evan's voice.

He must have been searching for the suddenly vanished Yeniel, just like in the game's story.

Hearing that voice, I made a decision.

"Let's run away…"

Leaving Yeniel behind, I returned to where everyone else was.

I hope Evan finds her…

CHAPTER 27
MIDTERM CAMP (4)

That dawn.

"Ugh…”

Yeniel regained consciousness and tried to sit up.

"Where am I…?"

"Yeniel, are you okay?"

Startled by the sudden voice, Yeniel turned her head toward its source.

"E-Evan?"

At the edge of her vision stood Evan.

In that moment, Yeniel noticed her attire.

It wasn't a typical school uniform but rather clothes resembling those of an assassin.

Touching her face, she realized she wasn't wearing a mask either.

Then, memories started flooding back to her, one by one.

She had been defeated by Rudy Astria and had lost consciousness.

But why was Evan here in front of her?

She should have been in jail. There was no reason for her to be here.

"Yeniel, how are you feeling?"

In response to Evan's concern, Yeniel nodded, indicating she was fine.

Yeniel had never been alone with Evan like this before, nor had they ever conversed. The situation felt awkward and confusing.

Although they were in the same group, they never had a real opportunity to talk.

She always held back while her groupmates, Serina and Garwel, chatted with Evan.

Yeniel fell into deep thought.

Did this guy know the current situation?

For now, it would be difficult for him to know that she was a rebel.

However, judging by her attire, he could guess that she was involved in something shady.

As Yeniel contemplated this, Evan spoke up.

"Yeniel, I'm not sure what situation you're in."

Evan said so and stood up from his seat.

"I don't expect you to tell me just because I asked. So…"

Evan gave a faint smile.

"When you feel like you can trust me a little more, I hope you'll share it with me."

Yeniel stared at Evan, dumbfounded.

Evan pointed in a direction with his finger.

"Over there, you'll find the others. Go change your clothes then join us."

Then he walked in the indicated direction.

"…He's too kind."

Yeniel snorted as she watched Evan disappear.

To make such a remark when even the professors or the student council were not enough to meet her demands?

All without even knowing what she had been planning to do?

Yeniel pondered on this as she rose to her feet.

"Naive…"

While saying this, a question arose in her mind.

After her defeat against Rudy Astria, how did she end up here with Evan?

Shouldn't Rudy Astria have called the student council or the professors after defeating her?

And how was it that Evan had been the one to find her?

No matter how much she thought about it, it didn't make sense.

Things didn't add up.

"I need to return first."

She needed to inform Garwel about this as soon as possible.

Yeniel gritted her teeth.

Directly telling Garwel would put her neck on the line.

She would have to mix some truth with lies.

Muttering these thoughts, she uttered a single statement.

"Rudy Astria…"

A member of the Astria family, an incompetent individual.

A guy who even had the top seat stolen by a commoner without any support.

Thinking this, she had initially considered it an easy task.

But it wasn't.

Yeniel remembered the look in Rudy Astria's eyes when they faced each other.

Indifferent and sharp.

A person who maintained such a gaze when ambushed…

Even though Yeniel had grown up as an assassin since childhood, she had never encountered someone like that.

She thought it could be possible if the person was strong.

However, the fact that an ordinary student reacted so calmly to the surprise left Yeniel bewildered.

"What is he up to…?"

Sensing that something was amiss, Yeniel changed into her school uniform and headed toward her groupmates.

* * *

The following morning.

"Hehehe… Did he really do that?"

“……It's understandable to be concerned if you heard something like that last night."

Rie laughed heartily, clutching her stomach, as she chatted with Luna.

They were discussing the events of the previous night.

I intentionally didn't tell Rie the truth.

I wanted to brush it off as mistaking a rabbit for a person.

But Rie wasn't the type to let things go easily.

Since the morning, she had been recounting how I was so nervous that I was trembling.

I was indeed nervous, but I wasn't trembling…

And the truth was, I had almost been assassinated.

Honestly, it felt unfair, but there was no point in dwelling on it now.

"Ah…"

Instead, I wondered if Evan had found Yeniel collapsed.

In the original story, Yeniel, who wanted to kill Rudy Astria, should have fought against Evan and been defeated.

Then Evan would realize that Yeniel was the assassin, but he wouldn't report it to the professors or anyone else.

That's how the relationship between Yeniel and Evan should have started.

But instead, I emerged as the victor.

It was something I never anticipated.

So what should I do now?

I had two options.

The first option was to reveal Yeniel as the assassin and bring this story to an end.

But I dismissed that immediately.

If I exposed Yeniel as the assassin, she would be swiftly arrested.

Then dealing with the rebels would become much more difficult later on.

As the story progressed, Yeniel would provide Evan with information about the

rebels.

She was essentially a double agent.

There was no reason to let go of this opportunity.

So, I had to choose the only other option.

And this option was simple.

Follow the original story.

There were two bosses in this story.

One was Garwel, and the other was Andrei, a knight from the rebels.

So, if we followed the original story, the rebels would attack this forest, and Garwel and Andrei would ambush Evan one after another.

Evan would easily deal with Garwel, but not with Andrei.

Evan couldn't defeat Andrei.

So, he would make Rie flee and hold off Andrei by himself.

It would be a story of Evan fighting Andrei and holding out until others arrived.

That would be the final battle of the midterm camp in the game.

If he succeeded in holding out there, Evan would receive a reward.

Andrei's magic sword.

It was an incredibly powerful weapon, suitable for Evan to use or trade.

Moreover, Andrei was a knight with a reputation among the rebels, entrusted with the task of assassinating the Princess.

I couldn't precisely gauge his influence since he died early on, but considering the performance of the magic sword, Andrei must have been formidable.

So, I had to deal with him here.

If I reported this to the professors, I could prevent this incident from happening.

If that happened, that guy could interfere in other stories, and I wouldn't be able to get his sword.

That would be a big problem.

Thus, I decided to let the incident happen.

"Assuming I do that…"

I had to make other preparations.

Garwel and Andrei would attack to eliminate Rie.

It was clear they would target our group instead of Evan's.

With the failed assassination and my presence, it was almost guaranteed.

I looked at Rie and Luna, who were chatting and having fun.

"I can't just let them die."

I had to prepare a countermeasure in advance.

No one would die.

Touching the summoning stone in my pocket, I walked towards Locke.

* * *

Garwel, Yeniel, and another man were conversing in a deserted place.

Yeniel explained what had happened.

But she didn't reveal all the details.

If she mentioned that she had been defeated and fainted during the fight, and Evan

discovered her identity, she knew her head would roll.

So, she cleverly concealed the situation.

She didn't mention anything about Evan, only that she had been defeated by Rudy Astria and had fled.

Smack!

"You useless girl… How did you fail?"

Garwel slapped Yeniel's cheek, leaving a red, swollen mark.

Yeniel felt the sting on her cheek, but she thought the punishment wasn't too severe.

The man standing beside them remained unresponsive, simply observing the situation.

"I heard they brought in an excellent assassin, but it seems you're just a failure," Garwel taunted Yeniel with a haughty gaze.

The observing man calmly spoke up.

"In that case, we should revise the plan."

"What if Rudy Astria reports to the professors? Won't everything be ruined then?"

"It's difficult to determine immediately. The academy will conduct its own assessment, and considering how well she managed to escape, it will be challenging to find concrete evidence."

"Hmm, I see."

As the man spoke in a composed manner, Garwel reluctantly accepted the explanation and settled down.

"Alright, then we need to resolve this tonight. Inform Andrei. Let's eliminate both Princess Rie and Rudy Astria tonight."

Garwel uttered those words with a malicious laugh.

He continued, "After that, Yeniel and I will take care of Serina and that Evan, and then we'll head over there."

"Serina and Evan?" Yeniel asked, surprised by Garwel's statement.

"We'll raise suspicion when we flee amidst the chaos, won't we? It's better to eliminate them. Besides, I never liked either of them. Just send a few soldiers. We'll dispatch them quickly and depart."

"Understood. I will inform Knight Andrei."

Yeniel felt uneasy about the command.

Although she believed it was necessary to kill Evan, who knew her true identity, he was the one who had covered for her.

She felt guilty at the thought of killing someone who had shown such kindness.

"We'll carry it out tonight," Garwel declared.

The moment Garwel spoke those words, the man in front of them disappeared without a trace.

* * *

On that fateful night.

The atmosphere was peaceful, no different from any other night.

Luna and Rie engaged in a quiet conversation, while Locke focused on practicing his swordsmanship.

Suddenly, breaking the tranquility, a loud explosion echoed through the air.

BANG!!!!!!!

"Huh?"

"What was that?"

Startled by the explosion, Luna and Rie abruptly stood up from their seats.

Has it begun?

Could it be the Rebels' attack?

In the game, the Rebels didn't target just one location.

They simultaneously attacked students dispersed across various places.

That way, they could divert the attention of the professors and student council.

Sensing something amiss, Rie retrieved a summoning stone from her pocket and began calling out to anyone.

"Hello? Can anyone hear me? Is anyone there?"

However, the summoning stone remained eerily silent.

"What's happening?" Rie furrowed her brows in concern.

Luna, too, voiced her worry. "Is something wrong?"

"It seems that way," I responded, noting the growing unease.

Recognizing the gravity of the situation, Rie swiftly rose from her seat. "Let's head towards the main building, just in case."

Her calm demeanor mirrored my own thoughts, and I felt grateful for her initiative.

Leaving behind everything but the essentials, we set off towards the center.

"What could be happening?" Rie led the way, her expression filled with concern.

We ventured into the dark forest, avoiding any magical fires that would expose our presence. As our eyes adjusted, the path ahead became discernible.

Through the dense undergrowth, the faint silhouette of a person emerged.

It was not a figure clad in our school uniform, but rather someone donning

lightweight chain armor.

Locke took a step forward, sword drawn, while the rest of us prepared our magic.

"Sylph!" Rie summoned her wind elemental, standing guard against the stranger.

"Identify yourself! If you don't, we will attack!"

Her voice carried authority.

The stranger slowly raised their head to meet our gaze.

Their eyes, cold and brimming with intent to kill, sent a shiver down my spine and caused goosebumps to rise on my skin.

Reacting to this unsettling sensation, we unleashed our magic spells without hesitation.

"Sylph! Attack! Wind Cutter!"

"Fireball!"

"Abyssal Flame."

Our spells were launched, aimed at the intruder.

Yet, to our astonishment, the enemy did not evade our assault.

With one swift motion, they raised their sword and effortlessly sliced through our spells.

"What the…?"

Rie stared at the scene, disbelief etched on her face.

A single strike was all it took. Even though we were novice wizards, our magic was not weak enough to be shattered so easily.

As we were taken aback by the unexpected turn of events, the stranger spoke.

"Attack."

In response to their command, hidden figures emerged from the grassy undergrowth, swiftly closing in on us.

Their target was not all of us; they focused solely on one person.

"Rie!"

I called out, pulling her arm.

"Ah!"

Startled, Rie instinctively moved closer to me, evading the impending attack, while Locke confronted the approaching assailants.

"What the hell…?"

"Rie, run."

"What?" Rie looked at me, puzzled.

I calmly grasped her hand and began running.

"Hey! What about Locke and Luna?"

"Just run! Didn't you see? You're their target!"

"What?"

Just as I had said, the figures dressed in black were pursuing us relentlessly from behind.

"Locke, take care of Luna!"

With a resolute shout, I sprinted towards the central building.

CHAPTER 28
MIDTERM CAMP (5)

As Rudy grasped Rie's hand tightly, they dashed forward, pursued by the others.

"Rudy…!"

Luna was taken aback by the sight.

If they ran away like that, she and Locke would have a chance to survive.

However, Rudy and Rie would be in even greater danger.

If the number of targets decreased from four to two, the assassins would have fewer people to worry about.

"We have to help…!"

As Luna tried to run in the direction Rudy and Rie had fled, Locke blocked her path.

Luna glared at Locke, her expression fierce.

"Move…”

"We're heading elsewhere."

Locke's words were met with Luna extending her hand.

Directly aiming for Locke's head.

"If you obstruct me, there will be consequences."

She was resolute, her lips tightly pressed together as she stared Locke down.

However, her hands were trembling.

Anxiety.

And fear.

Her eyes reflected a mixture of emotions.

"Luna Railer."

Despite the dire circumstances, Locke remained calm.

Luna couldn't comprehend Locke's behavior.

How could he remain so composed in such a situation?

Even though they'd only spent a few days together, weren't they comrades?

As she thought that, her emotions intensified.

"Move. Rudy and Rie are being chased right now."

"Haah…"

Locke sighed as he looked at the yelling Luna.

"Everything has unfolded exactly as Rudy Astria anticipated."

"…What?"

"Rudy Astria predicted this would happen and made arrangements."

Luna frowned.

What was he talking about now?

As Luna pondered this, Locke provided further explanation.

"Rudy Astria foresaw this situation and tasked me with something. There's something we must do."

"Do… what?"

Locke didn't offer a separate response; instead, he began walking.

Luna followed him, asking:

"What is it that we need to do?"

As Luna asked, Locke briefly turned his head and replied:

"We're going to help Evan."

* * *

"Ugh…!"

Gasping for breath, I clung to Rie's hand as we sprinted onward.

Branches and grass obstructed our path, but we employed magic to clear them, maintaining our speed.

I could hear the sound of pursuit from behind.

However, it seemed like their numbers had decreased somewhat.

The darkness of the forest made it difficult for them to accurately locate us.

But there was one person, a lone figure, who relentlessly pursued us.

It was likely Andrei.

And the sound of his footsteps drew nearer and nearer.

We had to run faster.

"Huff… huff…"

Yet Rie was reaching her limit.

As a wizard, physical training was a luxury, and stamina naturally suffered as a result.

"Rie, hold on just a little longer."

No matter how agonizing it was, she had to endure.

We couldn't afford to stop running.

Unlike when Evan fled with Rie, the area wasn't restricted by the game.

We didn't have to fight like they did; we could simply run.

We had to take advantage of that.

With that in mind, we pressed forward.

The current circumstances were not a game governed by fixed rules; this was reality.

As Rie's steps gradually slowed, I could feel our pursuer getting closer.

Footsteps pounding the ground.

“…He's closing in."

Swiftly, I turned around and extended my hand behind us.

"Wind Blaster!"

A powerful gust erupted from my outstretched hand, parting the grass in its wake.

And there, at the other end, stood the person we had initially encountered.

Andrei.

With a single stroke, he cleaved through my magic once again.

Andrei propelled himself off the ground, sprinting toward us.

Observing this, Rie exhaled with effort and called out.

"Sylph…!"

At Rie's command, multiple gusts of wind homed in on Andrei.

He halted momentarily, slashing away the winds rushing toward him.

Seizing the opportunity, I raised my hand skyward.

"Wind Blaster!"

Boom!

A fierce gust of wind raged, rustling the surrounding foliage as countless leaves descended like a shower.

Those leaves provided ample cover, obscuring our figures.

"Rie, keep running!"

"Ugh…"

Struggling to regain her breath, Rie followed me once more.

But her forced sprint would not last long.

"Haah… Haah… I can't… run anymore…"

Rie came to a halt, gasping for air.

I grasped Rie's shoulder and spoke.

"Rie, you can't stop. Just a little bit more."

"You… go. They're after me anyway. I'll… Haa… try something, so you go."

Rie collapsed onto the ground as she spoke.

She had reached her limit.

Her breaths were shallow, making it even difficult for her to speak.

This was not a situation that could be overcome through sheer willpower or any

other means.

“…Huh?"

I turned my back on Rie as I spoke.

"Get on."

“…What?"

"Hurry up and get on my back. We don't have much time."

Blocking their view earlier bought us some time, but they would catch up soon.

We had to run as fast as possible.

“…Hey, we'll both die like this. You should run and get help."

Rie's voice remained calm, her fists clenched tightly.

However, her tightly clenched fists were trembling.

She was scared too.

To resist assassins in her exhausted state was nonsensical.

She knew it, and yet she still said it.

For my sake.

How could I abandon her like this?

I had no intention of giving up. Strengthening my resolve, I approached Rie.

"Hey… what… what are you…!"

I forcefully grasped Rie's arm and lifted her onto my back.

"Don't try to be a hero. Save that performance for the academy. Just listen to me now."

"Let… me go. We'll both die if you do this…”

Rie struggled to free herself from my back, but she lacked the strength to do so.

I held Rie, who was now on my back, firmly.

"I won't let you die."

"Huh?"

"I won't abandon you and run away. Never. We'll both survive. Trust me."

For a moment, Rie gazed at me with a bewildered expression.

Then she bit her lower lip hard.

"If you die… I really won't forgive you."

I wasn't entirely sure how she wouldn't forgive me if I were dead, but there was no time for hesitation.

Rie tightly held onto me.

The strength in her embrace felt like trust.

It felt like she believed in me.

With Rie on my back, I resumed running.

"Huff… huff…”

After running for about ten minutes, my stamina began to wane.

I regretted not working on my physical fitness while practicing magic.

"I should start exercising once this is over…”

Fortunately, I had a plan…

I slowly came to a halt.

As I stopped, Rie spoke with a panicked voice.

As I came to a stop, Rie's voice sounded startled.

"Ru… Rudy?"

I surveyed our surroundings.

"Rudy, we haven't reached the center yet…"

"I know."

I acknowledged Rie's words while continuing to assess our environment.

This seemed about right.

"Rie, we need to hold out now."

"…What?"

"Just 5 minutes. We only have to hold out for approximately 5 minutes."

"What are you talking about?"

They're coming.

"Wind Blaster!"

I used magic behind me before I had a chance to answer Rie's question.

Bang!

"Ugh!"

A figure was sent flying by the force of my magic.

"Uh… Sylph!"

Rie stopped questioning and joined the fight.

"Wind Blaster!"

"Sylph! Push them back! Wind Cutter!"

Back to back, we stood against the assassins.

However, we were merely buying time.

After several clashes, the assassins' movements gradually came to a halt.

"Ignite."

I employed magic to illuminate our surroundings, revealing the assassins lurking in the shadows.

We were surrounded.

Numerous figures became visible, their count exceeding ten.

And among them, Andrei stepped forward.

"It seems it's all over now."

He removed his mask, revealing a smirk.

"Why are you weak wizards running around like this? It would be easier if you simply died."

Andrei drew his sword and approached us.

I threw a question his way.

"Where did Garwel go?"

“…What?"

Andrei furrowed his brow.

"What are you talking about?"

"I thought that Garwel guy would be here too, but I don't see him. Is there a problem?"

I spoke teasingly.

Andrei emitted a strong killing intent in response.

Naturally, he remained on guard.

There was no way I should know that Garwel was a rebel.

My question was meant to cause confusion.

As I anticipated, Andrei, who was approaching us, stopped and threw a question.

"Who the hell are you?"

Without hesitation, I dangled another piece of bait.

"Or perhaps, did he betray you? Maybe he's aiming for your throats?"

I grinned maliciously.

The provocation hit its mark.

A vein in the shape of a cross bulged on Andrei's forehead.

"It seems unnecessary for someone like you, who will soon die, to know."

"Is that so? Aren't you curious about how Yeniel survived and returned after failing in the assassination?"

"……”

Andrei gritted his teeth and glared at me.

He must have had concerns in his mind as well.

A mixture of lies and truth.

He didn't have the luxury to distinguish between them right now.

It just got under his skin.

"Rudy…?"

Rie tugged at my sleeve, her expression filled with worry.

I gave her a faint, reassuring smile.

"I wonder what Yeniel and Garwel are up to now?"

"Ha… Kill him."

Rather than extracting information from me, Andrei opted to kill me.

He charged toward me.

It was a good choice.

Killing me quickly and then searching for those two would be a better decision than trying to extract information from me.

I watched Andrei approach.

Yet, I remained motionless.

His sword couldn't reach me.

Because she had already arrived.

I once had a thought.

What would happen if a second-year student interfered with the dangers faced by first-year students?

What if she, the top student in her grade and the student council president, stepped in?

The conclusion was simple.

The balance would collapse.

Someone descended rapidly, tearing through the foliage above us.

With her red hair fluttering, she came down from above.

It was Astina.

Thud!-

With the momentum from her descent, she goomba stomped on Andrei.

Astina's foot connected precisely with Andrei's back, sending him crashing into the ground.

Blood spurted from his mouth.

"Cough!!"

Astina triumphantly stepped on Andrei and taunted him.

"Where do you think you're going?"

She extended her hand toward the sky.

Then, she turned her head slightly to glance at me.

"Rudy Astria, you did well."

Astina's mana surged.

Surrounding leaves trembled, and gentle winds gathered around Astina's hand.

The area trembled due to the massive movement of mana.

Astina's magic.

Her magic surpassed the capability of all these individuals combined.

"Crush."

The mana amassing in her hand expanded forcefully around her.

"Gravity."

Whoosh!-

Bang!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

"Ugh!!!"

"Argh!!!"

Leaves littered the ground, while even the slender trees snapped in half.

No ordinary person could withstand such immense power.

Everyone, except us, crumbled to the ground.

Astina's overwhelming strength.

These fools stood no chance against her.

Andrei might be strong, but he was someone who needed time to win against Evan.

No matter how many troops they had, they were mere pawns.

Confronting Astina head-on, victory was an impossibility, let alone being caught off-guard as she descended from the sky.

Astina after crushing the surroundings and looked at us.

A bright, smiling face.

With a playful grin, she said,

"Am I late?"

Returning Astina's smile, I responded.

"You've arrived right on time."

CHAPTER 29
MIDTERM CAMP (6)

"Ugh…”

Evan let out a groan.

However, someone else appeared more anxious.

"Why can't you finish him off faster? Just kill him quickly!"

Garwel shouted at those around him, stomping his foot in frustration.

"I should have brought stronger guys…”

A girl with sleepy eyes spoke lazily.

Beside her stood Clay, an intermediate earth elemental. It was Serina, the daughter of the Chief Elementalist.

Despite their outnumbered position, Serina and Evan managed to fend off all the assassins' attacks.

Yet, Evan's stamina was becoming an issue.

He was nearing his limit in using magic.

"Finish him off swiftly!"

Garwel stomped his foot and shouted again, but the composed assassins around him didn't falter.

"What's the plan, Miss Yeniel?"

"If we keep this up, it will turn into a battle of attrition. If we rush them, we risk losing a fight we could win."

The assassins trusted Yeniel more than Garwel's words.

Despite her youth, they had faith in her due to her extensive experience.

"Yeniel! End this swiftly!"

Yeniel ignored Garwel's shouts from behind.

That guy knew nothing.

He was an ignorant young master who had no understanding of battle.

Yeniel felt her annoyance growing.

She wanted to silence him and then focus on the fight, but she couldn't.

The Handrei family, to which Garwel belonged, played the role of financial backer for the Rebels.

She couldn't simply dismiss the son of such a supporter.

Although Garwel wasn't part of the original plan to assassinate Princess Rie, he insisted on participating.

Regardless, since Andrei would be directly responsible for the assassination, Yeniel thought there wouldn't be any issues.

Yeniel sighed and gave orders to those around her.

"For now, let's continue wearing them down like this. Exploit our numerical advantage."

"Understood."

The assassins smoothly moved, following Yeniel's command.

Yeniel found herself in a rather challenging situation.

"I should have just ignored them and moved on…"

The situation was dragging on for too long.

But there was no chance to end it.

If they rushed in as Garwel suggested, they could be wiped out. Yeniel couldn't make such a reckless decision.

Ignoring Evan and Serina from the start would have been the correct choice.

This damn Garwel messed up the plan by deciding to kill those two.

Yeniel observed the situation, and her eyes met Evan's.

Evan let out a tired exhale, glancing at his own condition.

"……”

It was the most logical judgment to make at that moment.

Targeting Evan was the right move.

Evan was stronger than Serina.

However, he was worn out and injured from shielding Serina during the initial ambush.

This was the moment.

It was common sense to strike when the strong one was fatigued.

But it was a challenging decision to make.

Whether it was due to the brief moment they had, or some other reason…

It was still a decision they had to make to survive.

"Everyone…”

Just as Yeniel gathered her determination,

"Wind Cutter."

"Ugh!"

"What the? Argh!"

Blades of wind soared from the bushes, and a man charged into the midst of the battle.

A man who swung his sword and struck down the assassins.

Behind him, a woman with brown hair wielded magic.

"Luna Railer and Locke Lucarion, huh."

Yeniel clenched her teeth at the sight of them.

How did they end up here?

Aren't those two part of Rudy Astria's team?

Moreover, how did they know Evan was under attack?

Yeniel quickly wracked her brain, but she couldn't make sense of the situation.

"What… who are those guys!"

Garwel stumbled back in astonishment upon seeing the duo.

"Huff!"

"Ugh!"

"Clay, assist them."

As Locke took the lead and swept away the assassins, Serina and Evan also joined in to support him.

The assassins were caught off guard.

Yeniel observed for a few seconds and swiftly made a decision.

"Retreat!"

Yeniel called out and leaped onto a tree.

As she attempted to flee, a shout reached her ears.

"What? Who says?!"

It was Garwel.

Garwel grumbled and argued against Yeniel's command.

"Kill them all!! I thought you guys were exceptional, how can you be struggling against these weaklings?"

Yeniel felt a throbbing headache at Garwel's words.

Even among the exceptional, there are hierarchies.

The students of Liberion Academy are not just ordinarily exceptional.

It's a place where only the most outstanding individuals in the empire are gathered.

Even if they're assassins, they are exceptional only among ordinary people.

It was obvious that they would be no match.

"We must retreat."

Yeniel told the angered Garwel.

However, Garwel seemed unwilling to heed Yeniel's words.

"I suppose I have to step in."

Garwel confidently stepped forward.

"These guys are just… Huh?"

As Garwel advanced, Locke dashed toward him with incredible speed.

The assassins had formed a protective ring around Garwel, but his advance had left an opening.

"Huff!"

"Ugh!"

With his swift speed, Locke struck Garwel's face with his fist.

Garwel was knocked down without even a chance to react.

"Uh……”

Seeing this, Yeniel felt a throbbing pain in her head.

That useless brat.

He was of no help at all.

First, they needed to rescue Garwel.

Even though he may be utterly useless, saving him took priority.

"Everyone, save Garw-."

Gulp!

As Yeniel was about to speak, she heard the sound of paper tearing below.

Yeniel immediately recognized the sound.

In this situation, there was only one reason why the sound of paper tearing would be heard.

The sound of a scroll being torn.

"Haah……”

Yeniel sighed.

It was a sigh of resignation.

Then, from where the tearing sound originated, green tendrils spread out.

The tendrils extended, ensnaring each of the scattered assassins one by one.

"Don't move."

Standing where the magic from the torn scroll was activated was Luna, her eyes glaring fiercely.

* * *

All the assassins attacking us were successfully subdued by Astina.

Soon after, others arrived and bound the assassins, taking them to the center of the forest.

"Sigh…"

Rie and I sat near the central building, utterly drained. Leaning against a tree, we were too exhausted to exchange a single word.

Thankfully, it all worked out.

It was a relief.

Now, if only Locke and Luna returned safely, everything would be resolved.

With Evan and Serina there, I honestly didn't think there would be any issues.

Moreover, we had coordinated with Astina in advance, ensuring the safe return of the others as well.

"Hoo…"

I observed the break of dawn in the distance.

As the sun began to rise, and with no sounds of commotion, it seemed that the situation had somewhat stabilized.

While gazing at the emerging sunlight, Rie spoke up.

"Why didn't you leave me behind?"

"Huh?"

I looked at Rie, puzzled by her sudden question.

"You should have left me behind, dummy. If you had known Astina was nearby, you should have gone alone to fetch her. Both of us could have died. You weren't acting rationally."

Rie spoke to me matter-of-factly.

I couldn't argue with her logic.

If I had rushed alone to bring Astina, at least one of us would have undoubtedly survived.

If things went well, there was a chance that both of us could have made it out alive.

However, I had my reasons for the choices I made.

If I had brought Astina and faced the assassins head-on, there was a chance we would have lost.

By provoking them and leading them to the predetermined location, I allowed Astina to launch a surprise attack successfully, resulting in our victory.

From that perspective, I thought it was a reasonable decision.

As I pondered on that, Rie spoke quietly.

"Thank you…"

"Huh?"

"Thank you."

Rie looked at me with a faint smile.

"You could have abandoned me. If I were in your position, I might have left you behind and fled. Even though we're allies, I believe that my own life is the most important."

She calmly expressed her sentiments.

It was a typical Rie-like statement.

Rie was a calculative and rational individual.

"If our positions were reversed in the same situation, I would have tried to leave you behind and run."

Rie rose from her seat and stood before me.

"But if my life isn't in danger, I would have done everything I can to assist you."

The rising sun cast a radiant glow on Rie, enveloping her figure in an orange hue.

Her smile was as fresh as the morning dew, pure and untainted.

"You deceitful, filthy nobles!!!!"

Suddenly, a loud noise reverberated in the distance.

“…What?"

Upon hearing that, Rie returned to her usual self.

The atmosphere had been somewhat emotional, but it was ruined by that strange outburst.

Turning our gaze in that direction, we saw Andrei, bound and screaming.

Astina stood before him, her expression filled with disdain as she observed Andrei.

Rie and I approached them.

As soon as he caught sight of us, Andrei clenched his teeth.

"Ah, the offspring of those who exploit the Empire have arrived."

Exploit the Empire?

Perhaps that's one way to describe the Astria family.

But Rie…

Referring to the daughter of the Emperor as an exploiter of the Empire? I couldn't help but chuckle at the absurdity.

"You two wouldn't understand……. The suffering of the common people. If you relinquished even a fraction of your privileges, hundreds, no, thousands of commoners could live in prosperity. But what do you do?"

Andrei spat out his words like a madman.

"How unfortunate! We should have eliminated all of you. Only then would the commoners have found happiness……!"

He continued his rant.

"Someday, your kind will crumble before us. We, who bear the weight of a noble cause, will one day overthrow you!"

Well…

To some extent, I agree that nobles exploit the common people.

It's the nature of this world.

But what?

Do we have to die for the commoners to be happy?

Rather than assassinating corrupt nobles, he's attempting to kill students attending

the Academy, all while claiming it's for the sake of the commoners?

There was no reason to listen to such nonsense.

"Rie, we don't need to listen. Let's go--"

As I attempted to tell Rie to leave, I glanced back.

Rie held a stone in her hand.

"Huh?"

Rie lightly pushed me aside with her hand and swung the stone as it was.

Thwack!!!

"Ack!!!"

The stone struck Andrei's head precisely, causing blood to gush out.

"Hurgh……”

The onlookers gasped at the sight.

Rie paid no heed to their reactions.

"Trying to justify your attempted assassination? You murderous bastard."

Despite her discerning eyes, Rie didn't conceal her nature and acted without hesitation.

"Motive? Justice? You're nothing more than a killer. No, not even that. You haven't taken anyone's life, so you're merely a lowly bug incapable of reaching the status of a murderer. You worthless bug."

She attempted to strike Andrei once again with another stone in her hand.

Immediately, Astina grabbed hold of Rie.

"Hey……”

"Let go! Someone like him deserves to be hit!"

Rie struggled while being restrained by Astina.

Andrei, a skilled knight, possessed a sturdy physique. He wouldn't die even if he were hit again.

He was still alive after taking Astina's attack, after all.

However, we need to intervene for Rie's image.

"Let me go!!"

"Rie, calm down……”

Astina, in an attempt to soothe Rie, led her away.

There might be some damage to Rie's image, but it was a somewhat gratifying act.

After a brief moment, individuals emerged from a distance, returning with several tied-up assassins.

"Rudy!"

Among them, Luna waved her hand at me.

So, Luna's group succeeded as well?

I smiled and waved back at Luna, my heart filled with joy.

CHAPTER 30
MIDTERM CAMP (7)

"The Rebels, huh…”

Inside the central building, a middle-aged man listened to a report.

That man was McDowell Cliver, the headmaster of Liberion Academy.

As the face and representative of the academy, he had personally come to this place.

"Has the report been sent to the central authorities?"

In front of him stood the professor in charge of the midterm event.

"We've used a magic tool to send it immediately, and His Majesty the Emperor is aware. We informed him that Princess Rie is unharmed."

"It's fortunate that Astina acted quickly."

McDowell brought the coffee on his desk to his lips.

"By the way, Astina just made a few requests."

"Requests?"

"She asked if we could give her Andrei's sword, the ringleader of this incident."

McDowell shrugged nonchalantly.

"We can do that much. After all, it was Astina who caught him."

"Yes… I thought that wouldn't be a problem, but…”

"What else is there?"

McDowell casually took another sip of his coffee.

"She asked not to hand over Yeniel, one of the assassins and a student of the academy."

"An assassin?"

"She wants to use her as a double agent."

"A double agent…"

McDowell fell into brief contemplation.

He wondered if it would be possible.

If news of the captured Rebels had already reached the palace, the Rebels would be aware of it too.

Sending an assassin back to the Rebels so blatantly would surely arouse suspicion.

"Have you sent any other information about the assassins to the royal family?"

"No, nothing. We haven't even finished sorting out the situation yet, so we couldn't do that much."

After some deliberation, McDowell spoke.

"Call Astina and the assassin here. Let's hear their plan and decide."

"Understood. What will you do about the students now?"

The event wasn't entirely over.

There was an afterparty left.

However, it was unclear whether it should be held in this chaotic situation.

"I'll stay with the students."

"…You mean, Headmaster, you'll stay here?"

"Everyone must be tense and scared. Sending them back to the academy like this, they wouldn't be able to go on as normal. It would be better to laugh and chat with those who had the same experience here. I'll handle any unforeseen dangers."

"Understood."

The professor bowed to McDowell and left the room.

* * *

Luna spotted me waving my hand and hurried over.

"Rudy! Are you hurt anywhere? Where's Rie?"

She immediately scanned me for injuries and searched for Rie.

"Rie went with Astina for a moment."

"Then, nothing serious happened?"

I nodded with a faint smile at Luna's question.

"Thank goodness…"

Luna let out a sigh of relief.

She must have been very worried.

"Rudy, that's not fair."

"Huh?"

Luna put her hands on her hips and glared at me.

Her stance seemed to say, 'I'm mad at you!'

"You talked to Locke but didn't tell me anything!"

"Uh…"

"And you tried to handle such a dangerous situation alone!"

"…"

"You did wrong, didn't you?"

"Yeah…"

"Lower your head."

"Lower my head?"

Luna gestured with her fingers for me to bow my head.

I did as she asked, lowering my head.

Thump!

A gentle impact was felt on my head.

Luna had flicked my forehead with her small hand.

It wasn't painful, nor did it leave a bad feeling.

"You're getting one flick today. Next time, it'll be two. Be prepared. And…"

Her warm hand gently patted my head.

"You did well… I'm so glad you came back alive…"

I slightly raised my head and saw Luna smiling faintly.

"Rudy Astria."

Hearing someone call my name, I turned around.

Locke was approaching with Rie in tow.

She was still fuming.

"Are you still upset?"

I looked at Rie disdainfully.

"That guy should have been hit a few more times with a rock."

"He's going to be taken to the palace and tortured far worse than that. What's the point of being so angry?"

Attempting to assassinate the princess and openly declaring themselves as rebels meant they would face severe torture.

It was only natural to eliminate the root once the sprout was discovered.

Though they weren't exactly the type to be easily uprooted.

"That's not my job. I want to be the one to beat him."

"Right…”

I also had some annoying feelings towards Andrei, but since he was going to die soon, I thought it didn't matter much.

During our conversation, Luna asked Rie a question.

"Rie, are you hurt anywhere?"

Luna examined Rie's body as if she were her mother.

"No, I'm not hurt, just a bit tired."

Normally, Rie would have brushed her off, but she seemed to like Luna, so she just gave her a faint smile while being inspected.

While we were chatting, a professor's voice could be heard from a distance.

"Attention, students!"

Behind the professor stood several student council members.

"We're truly sorry about this incident. Due to our negligence, this disgraceful event has occurred. We sincerely apologize."

The professor and student council bowed to us in apology.

"The situation has been resolved, and the headmaster has personally come to inspect the premises. There's no need to worry about your safety."

The professor continued.

"Accommodations and a banquet are provided inside the building. Those who are tired may return to their rooms to rest, while those who are hungry can proceed to the cafeteria! If any students are injured, please head to the infirmary!"

It seemed the rebel situation had been somewhat resolved.

With the headmaster present, there was no need to worry too much.

If they thought there were still rebels nearby, they wouldn't let the students rest here; they'd send them back to the academy.

After the announcement, students gradually entered the building.

Once I saw people moving, I turned to Rie.

"Rie, do you want to go in and rest?"

Since she said she was tired, it seemed best for her to rest in her room. She had survived in the wild for five days and had been running around tense, so she must have been exhausted.

However, her response was different.

"No!"

Her stomach growled.

Grasping her hungry stomach, Rie's eyes lit up as she declared,

"I'm going to eat."

* * *

After finishing our meal, we went outside to let our stomachs digest.

The sky had already darkened, leaving only the moonlight and the dim glow from the building.

"Ugh… I'm so full…”

"You should've eaten in moderation. Suddenly eating that much could make you sick."

Rie seemed to be in pain from overeating.

On the other hand, Luna's eyes sparkled with excitement.

"I… I've never eaten food like this before… I can't believe such dishes exist in this world…”

Luna was still reeling from the splendid feast.

She wasn't the only one.

I, too, secretly marveled at the meal.

I thought I was fed up with Western cuisine and needed to eat Korean food.

However, I was wrong.

I was tired of low-quality food, not Western cuisine.

The steak, salad, and stews had all been divine, melting in my mouth.

I experienced a sense of wonder for food I had never felt even in the modern world.

However, I couldn't show my amazement outwardly.

As a noble, I had to act as if I had tasted such food before.

"Oh, right!"

As we walked, Luna suddenly clapped her hands and stopped in her tracks.

"I have something to show you."

"Something to show?"

Upon my question, Luna nodded and quickly dashed to where she had left her bag.

She rummaged through the bag and pulled out a scroll.

"A scroll?"

Rie cocked her head at the sight.

Luna grinned and ran back to us, unfurling the scroll.

"Hehe… Ta-da!"

Rie and I scrutinized the scroll.

A square magic circle.

It looked similar to the one Luna had first created but was more intricate and featured a few additions.

"Hmm… Light magic, and… duplication…"

Rie slowly read the magic circle.

"I'll show you what it does! Sit down here!"

Luna told us to sit in front of a tree, then stepped back slightly.

She attempted to tear the scroll when Rie asked, her head tilted.

"…Is it okay to use a scroll like that?"

I somewhat agreed with her statement.

Considering Luna's financial situation, even though the scroll didn't appear too

expensive…

I had been giving Luna a considerable amount of money for her research, but it still bothered me.

"It's a reward for our hard work!"

Luna cheerfully replied and tore the scroll.

Immediately, countless lights spread from the scroll.

The number of lights was incomparable to Luna's initial creation.

The lights dispersed around us and began to rise into the sky.

Like releasing lanterns, countless lights soared into the heavens.

"Wow…"

Rie couldn't help but marvel at the sight.

"Wow, what's that!"

"Whoa…!"

Similar sounds of admiration echoed from others who saw Luna's magic.

Luna quickly came to my side and gazed up at the sky, then asked me,

"Pretty, right?"

"…Yeah, it's beautiful."

The black sky, embroidered with colorful lights, was stunning.

The fatigue that had been building up seemed to dissipate as we watched.

We stared at the sky, lost in its beauty for several minutes.

A few minutes later…

Thump-

Rie, who had been gazing at the sky beside me, rested her head on my shoulder.

"What's up?"

I glanced sideways and saw Rie, snuggling closer.

"She must be really tired."

Luna smiled at the sight.

"Should we head in now?"

As I said that, I tried to carry Rie.

"Wait a moment!"

Luna reached out to me.

“…Why?"

"No, no! You can't do that! Not when a girl is sleeping!"

Luna stuttered out her words.

I was confused and glanced back and forth between Luna and Rie.

"What should we do, then?"

When I asked Luna, she hesitated and seemed to be deep in thought.

Finally, she made up her mind.

"I, I'll carry her!"

“…You?"

Rie was shorter than Luna.

She should be enough to carry her…

Well, if she wants to do it, no need to oppose her.

"Alright, go ahead."

"Y-Yes!"

Luna started walking with Rie on her back.

Her struggling figure was pitiful to watch.

Having carried Rie before, I knew she wasn't particularly heavy.

After watching Luna for a while, I opened my mouth.

“…Do you need help?"

"No! I… uh… can do it!"

And so, Luna carried Rie to the room, groaning under her weight every step of the way.

CHAPTER 31
MIDTERM CAMP (7)

It was a warm sunny weekend afternoon.

Some people were still sleeping, while others had left the academy to visit their homes, creating a relaxed atmosphere on campus.

During this peaceful time, a lively tea party was taking place.

"It must have been so frightening…”

Rie was drinking tea at the bakery with a few students.

Socializing.

With a forced smile, she spent her weekend afternoon drinking tea with people she wasn't particularly close to.

"Thanks to Astina senior, we were able to escape safely."

She recounted the incident from the midterm camp.

Even though a few days had already passed since the event, everyone listened intently.

Except for Rudy's group, the other students were immediately rescued by the student council and professors, so nothing major happened to them.

Therefore, the other students were unaware of what had transpired during the incident and eagerly listened to Rie's story.

"And that's how we managed to escape."

After sharing some details about the midterm camp, Rie brought up the main topic.

"By the way, aren't your parents worried about the incident?"

"Everyone is quite concerned. They even told me to return home once to show my face."

"Really? In that case…”

As Rie gestured, a servant standing behind her brought forward a box.

"What… is this?"

The students in front gaped at the sight before them.

"Ah~ I heard that many exquisite things came from the Lotein territory this time. So, I thought of offering this as a token of our friendship~. When you return to your respective territories, it would be nice to present this as a gift to your parents. It will alleviate their worries as well."

The students couldn't help but admire the gift.

Inside the box lay beautifully crafted rubies.

"Can we really accept these…?"

"Don't worry about it. Between us, these are just small gifts. Please, accept them without any burden."

Rie smiled as if it was no big deal, but her expression and inner thoughts were differed.

'How much are these worth… Sigh… '

Even Rie felt overwhelmed by the expensive jewels.

Nonetheless, she gave them away because the students in front of her belonged to noble families near the Handrei family's territory.

After the recent incident, the Handrei family claimed that Garwel's actions were solely his and had nothing to do with their family.

But how absurd was that?

Garwel had never left the family's territory since he was young and had only left it to attend the academy.

When could he have encountered the rebels?

'You think you can escape?'

No matter how much they tried to disassociate themselves from Garwel, their lies would eventually be exposed.

However, she remained silent due to the lack of evidence.

But it wouldn't be long until some was found, the Handrei family were just buying time.

But why?

Rie quickly figured it out.

The family head was trying to embezzle the assets and flee.

Rie became more certain when she heard about numerous merchants loitering around the Handrei territory.

So, Rie decided to apply pressure before they escaped.

The Handrei territory was at a considerable distance from the central region.

Thus, it was more efficient for the nearby lords to exert pressure rather than sending forces from the central area.

Rie smiled and looked at the students in front of her.

Once these students brought the rubies home, the nobles would understand the meaning behind them.

If they accepted the rubies and took no action…

Well, the lords receiving them would know the consequences better than anyone else.

"Well then~ I'll be counting on you~."

"Yes, of course!"

All of them replied, unable to take their eyes off the rubies she gave them.

Rie found their behavior pathetic, almost enough to make her sigh.

However, she swallowed her sigh for now and proceeded with the tea party as planned.

"Now, for today's dessert—."

"Excuse me…"

As Rie was about to speak with a smile, a servant bowed and whispered into her ear.

"Um… Young Master Rudy Astria is outside…"

"…Rudy?"

Rie paused to think for a moment before asking the employee.

"Why did he come?"

She had indeed mentioned that she would be having a tea party with some nobles at the bakery today.

She said they would chat after the tea party, but she didn't expect him to come here directly.

"I'm not sure… He said he would wait inside and come when you're finished…"

Hearing that, Rie contemplated for a moment before letting out a laugh.

She then turned to the students in front of her with a bright smile and said,

"I'll pack today's dessert for you separately~. Enjoy it at home~."

“…Eh?"

The students who had been seated in front of her looked at Rie with puzzled expressions.

It had been less than 30 minutes since the tea party had started.

Desserts hadn't been served yet, but the organizer was already telling them to go back to their rooms.

As everyone stared at Rie with bewildered faces, she feigned ignorance and smiled.

"Is there… a problem?"

Though her smile appeared sweet and innocent, her words carried a certain firmness.

"Ah… No! It's the weekend! It's better to rest in our rooms early!"

"Ha… ha…! Yes… yes, that's right!"

The students awkwardly laughed and agreed.

Rie, satisfied with their reactions, stood up from her seat.

"Well then, I'll leave it to you."

With that, she left the room.

* * *

Outside, she saw Rudy Astria admiring the desserts.

"Hey."

Rie called out to Rudy.

“…What? Weren't you in the middle of a tea party?"

Rudy looked at Rie with a puzzled expression.

"I just came out for a moment."

"No… I didn't mean for you to come out right away. I was planning to wait while enjoying some dessert."

Rudy held a few desserts in his hands.

"Then let's eat."

"What?"

Rie looked around and picked a few desserts for herself.

"The egg tarts here are delicious. You should try one too."

“…Really?"

Rie casually chose some desserts and handed them to Rudy.

“…What's going on?"

"Your treating. You're the one who wanted to meet, remember?"

"Didn't you say during the back then…”

Rie pretended not to know and made an innocent face.

"Huh? I don't know what you're talking about?"

Rudy sighed at her reaction.

"Fine, I'll buy it. How much is this…?"

"I'd like a coffee too~."

Rudy glanced at Rie for a moment, shook his head, and went to pay.

Despite his reaction, Rudy paid for the desserts Rie had given him and the coffee.

"You really do listen well."

Rie watched Rudy pay with a pleased expression.

* * *

After the incident at the midterm camp, Liberion Academy appeared peaceful on the surface, but turmoil was brewing within.

The main issue was the infiltration and assassination attempt by the rebels.

Although the incident occurred outside the academy, the criticism for the inadequate response was severe.

In contrast, Astina's reputation soared.

She received high praise for saving Rie and for effectively leading the student council to minimize injuries among the students.

Of course, this was only possible because I had whispered some advice to Astina.

Under the guise of apprehending the intruder, Astina had the student council patrol the area while she waited at the designated location I had disclosed.

The outcome was flawless.

The student council, strategically positioned, confronted the assassins and managed to hold their ground until the professors and teaching assistants arrived.

Astina received all the credit for this well-executed response.

"But it's become difficult to meet her."

I rested my chin on my hand.

Seeing Astina was challenging as she was busy meeting with the headmaster and various high-ranking individuals for the past few days.

Moreover, she seemed to be absent from the academy now.

"I hope everything went smoothly…"

I had entrusted two tasks to Astina.

One was to deliver Andrei's sword to Evan, and the other was to ensure Yeniel remained at the academy.

Obtaining Andrei's sword would be easy, but I wondered what had happened to Yeniel.

Lately, Yeniel hadn't been seen anywhere in the academy.

However, when I asked other students, they said Yeniel had been injured at the camp and was currently hospitalized.

The fact that the students didn't see Yeniel as an assassin was a positive sign.

I'd have to meet Astina to know the proper conclusion.

And after midterm camp ended, my life underwent some changes as well.

I began dedicating myself to the study of dark magic under the guidance of Professor Robert.

"Ah, you're here."

After class.

When I arrived at Professor Robert's office, I found him lying on a couch in his tracksuit.

"Are we continuing today as well?"

"Yes. If you're not up for it, just say so."

"No, it's not that."

I wasn't exactly learning dark magic.

- What do you believe is the fundamental aspect of dark magic?

- I'm not sure.

- The basis of dark magic is physical strength.

Upon hearing those words, I started running laps around the sports field.

Meanwhile, Professor Robert reclined under the sunlight, peacefully dozing off on the grass.

Initially, I assumed that Professor Robert had changed into his tracksuit to run alongside me, but he simply claimed that his suit was uncomfortable.

Although it felt somewhat unfair, I had no choice but to follow his instructions.

"Huff… huff…”

In this manner, I ran for two hours every day.

Although the exercise proved irksome at times, I found great satisfaction once it was over.

I had faced issues with my lack of physical strength, so I had intended to start exercising like this anyway.

And now, not only did this exercise benefit me, it also helped with my dark magic studies, and I was being personally trained by Professor Robert, killing two birds with one stone.

After some time had passed, I stopped jogging around the track and exhaled.

"Whew…”

As I wiped the sweat off my brow with my sleeve, Professor Robert spoke up.

"Since we have a visitor today, let's wrap it up here."

A visitor?

At Professor Robert's words, I turned to see Rie standing there.

Rie casually tossed a water bottle in my direction.

"Hey, catch."

The water bottle was filled with cool water.

"What's this for? You didn't have to do that."

"It's payback for the dessert you got me last time. And this."

Rie threw a bundle of papers at me.

"Astina says she's too busy to meet with you these days. This is a report of the current situation and how things are progressing written on it."

"Thanks."

I had asked her to arrange a meeting with Astina while buying her dessert, but I didn't expect a response so quickly.

I unfolded the papers Rie had given me.

In summary, everything was proceeding as planned.

Yeniel was able to attend the Academy as usual through a contract with Headmaster McDowell, and Andrei's sword was passed on to Evan.

It was presented as a reward for capturing Garwel.

Evan had been able to win because Luna and Locke had helped him, so he intended to pass the sword on to them.

However, Luna and Locke received separate rewards and so he finally accepted the sword.

"Hmm…"

Rie stared intently at me as I wiped my sweat.

She scrutinized me, assessing me from head to toe.

"Why are you giving me that look?"

Rie cupped her chin and continued to examine me.

"Your physique isn't as impressive as I imagined."

"Well, what do you expect from a wizard?"

After observing me for a while, Rie turned around.

"I've delivered the message. I'm heading off now."

"Alright. Take care."

I waved at Rie as she walked away.

CHAPTER 32
A CUP OF TEA (2)

Luna was studying in the library with Riku and Ena.

Ever since the midterm camp concluded, the library had been partially repaired and made accessible to the students once again.

So Luna returned to her usual routine of studying in the library with her friends but there was one noticeable absence—Rudy.

Due to his recent rigorous training under the guidance of Professor Robert, Rudy hadn't been able to join them in their studies.

Luna couldn't help but feel a twinge of disappointment, but she found solace in the fact that they still ate together every day.

"Ugh…"

As the hours ticked by, Luna's hunger began to gnaw at her, causing her to yawn and glance at the time.

Ena, noticing her restlessness, also checked the clock and spoke up.

"Shall we head to dinner now?"

Luna nodded wearily, her stomach rumbling in agreement.

Ena gently nudged Riku, who had been dozing off, to awaken her from her slumber.

"Uh… hmm?"

Riku, still groggy, looked around in confusion as she raised her head.

"Awaaaaahh… What's happening?"

Ena explained with a smile, "Let's go grab dinner."

Surprised, Riku glanced at the time and exclaimed, "Oh… Is it already that late? I haven't even started my assignment…"

"That's because you doze off as soon as the lecture begins," Ena chided, voicing her dissatisfaction.

Riku, now wearing a gloomy expression, responded, "Heu… I feel so sleepy…"

Luna peered at the book spread out before Riku and asked, "Is this the assignment for the political science lecture?"

Riku sighed and replied, "Yeah… I don't know anyone in the class, so I'm completely lost…"

"If you paid attention during the lectures, this wouldn't have been an issue," Ena remarked.

Riku's expression grew even more forlorn, and she lamented, "It's not my fault… It's the professor's fault… I can't understand a single thing, no matter how much I try to listen…"

Ena, slightly exasperated, retorted, "Then why don't you ask the professor for clarification during the lecture?"

"Ena! You don't understand!" She objected, standing up abruptly to express her disagreement.

"What don't I understand?"

"Only those who possess some knowledge can ask questions! Those who truly don't know anything can't even formulate the right questions! In order to ask questions, I'd have to admit from the start that I don't understand, but I can't bring myself to do that! No, it's fundamentally wrong! If he were a professor worth his salt, he would explain things in a slow and easily understandable manner for the students. But instead, they always assume that we know what they know! And then…"

Riku's anger stemmed from the difficulty of the assignment, but it spiraled into a discussion about the fundamental attitude a professor should adopt.

Ena understood it all too well—Riku needed someone to direct her resentment towards.

"Uh… This seems familiar," Luna remarked, her eyes focused on Riku's book as she read it slowly.

"Do you want me to help you after dinner? It's a different subject, but it seems similar to what I've studied," Luna suggested.

"Really…? Luna!!! You're my savior!" Riku exclaimed, rushing towards Luna and enveloping her in a tight embrace, her face nestled against Luna's chest.

Ena sighed at the sight before her. "Luna, don't spoil her too much. You already helped her with the magic theory homework last time."

"Hehe…"

"Let's go eat first," Ena suggested.

"Alright~," Riku replied, her voice filled with excitement.

"Ah, by the way, Rudy said he'll join us for dinner today, so I'll go and get him," Luna added.

"Okay, we'll be waiting for you in front of the restaurant," Ena confirmed.

With that settled, Luna prepared to head elsewhere.

"Oh, Luna."

"Hm?"

"You seem to be getting along well with Rudy these days, don't you think?" Ena asked, catching Luna off guard with her sudden question.

Luna's face turned a shade of red, her eyes darting around in confusion. "W-Well?"

Ena raised an eyebrow.

"I-I don't know what you're talking about???? I-I'll go and find Rudy quickly! Ah!"

And just like that, Luna dashed off in the direction she was originally heading.

"Hmm…" Ena mused, watching Luna's hasty departure. "I'm genuinely concerned…"

She stroked her chin, deep in thought. When she had heard that Rudy and Luna had formed a team for the midterm camp, she had anticipated progress in their relationship.

Yet, there had been no news at all.

Ena recalled Luna preparing a magic circle to show Rudy and heard about her showcasing it during the conclusion of the camp.

And yet, nothing seemed to have changed. Or was it possible that there were changes, but they were simply going unnoticed? or maybe in places far from her eyes?

She quickly dismissed the thought.

Ena knew that Luna and Rudy Astria weren't like that.

"Will they work out…?" Ena mused quietly to herself.

With Luna's shy demeanor and Rudy's singular focus on magic, progress was akin to hiking up a mountain.

Grrr-

"Ah… I'm hungry," Riku absentmindedly muttered to herself.

Ena felt her temper flare at this sight.

Whack!

"Ouch!"

Ena's anger got the better of her, prompting her to deliver a swift smack to Riku's head.

"What… what's the matter!" Riku exclaimed, rubbing the spot where she had been

hit.

Staring back at Riku, her innocent victim, she shouted, "You've been receiving all this help from Luna, and this is how you behave!"

"…?????"

Riku's eyes filled with question marks as she gazed at Ena, utterly bewildered.

Unaware of the situation, Riku could only feel wronged.

* * *

"It should be around here…"

Luna made her way toward the sports field, scanning her surroundings. In the distance, she spotted Rudy engaged in a series of push-ups, in exercise attire.

While his upper body was covered by a white short-sleeved tee, it was drenched in sweat, revealing his physique.

"Hmm… Hmm!"

Luna turned her head away, her cheeks reddening. "No… Why, why should I feel embarrassed…!"

After all, Rudy was simply exercising in an open sports field, where anyone could witness his actions. There was no reason for her to avert her gaze.

Reaching this realization, Luna sneakily turned her head and stole another glance at Rudy.

"Oh…"

Luna found herself captivated, her gaze fixed on Rudy.

Observing him focused on his exercise routine presented a completely different image compared to when she saw him studying.

"I… I should stop staring."

Shaking herself out of her reverie, Luna regained her composure and attempted to approach Rudy.

As Luna descended the stairs to approach Rudy, she noticed a set of clothes and a water bottle left nearby. It was a training top, and judging by the color, it was likely Rudy's.

"……”

An overwhelming impulse surged within upon seeing the top.

However, her rationality held her back.

This wasn't right.

There were boundaries to respect.

She absolutely could not.

And so, Luna's sense of right and wrong battled within her, like an angel and devil in eternal conflict.

* * *

I finished my push-ups and stood up.

Is it almost time to wrap up?

Just as the thought crossed my mind, Professor Robert approached me.

"Let's call it a day. Your friend is here," Professor Robert informed me.

At his indication, I looked in the direction he pointed. In the distance, I spotted a figure sitting on the stairs.

Ah… I had made dinner plans with Luna.

Though the wall next to the staircase obscured her figure, I could see her brown hair fluttering—it was likely Luna.

"Thank you for your guidance."

"Alright. You can go."

I bid farewell to Professor Robert and made my way towards Luna.

"Luna, have you been waiting long…?"

"Eeek!!!"

As I approached the staircase and began speaking to Luna, she let out a startled scream.

"You scared me…"

Observing Luna, I noticed she was clutching my clothes, her face flushed as red as a beet.

"……Did you see?" Luna asked, her eyes welling up with tears.

What was she talking about? Why was she acting this way?

"……See what?"

"N-No… No! Nothing! Really! It's nothing!"

"So, what's 'nothing'…" I questioned, perplexed by Luna's behavior.

What on earth was she referring to?

"Didn't you come for dinner?"

I posed the question, to which Luna nodded vigorously.

"Y-Yes! That's right! We should go have dinner! You must be hungry after your workout!"

Luna hastily rose from her seat, and I extended my hand toward her.

"Uh, uh, uh?"

"I'll take the clothes. I took them off during the workout, so they might have a bit of a smell…”

Since I had removed my clothes halfway through the workout, it was likely that they were slightly sweaty.

They wouldn't be too damp, but they might still have a slight smell, so I offered to hold them.

However, Luna's response was a little unusual.

"Smell! Ah, ah ah……”

"……?"

I stared at Luna with a puzzled expression.

Her face turned red once again, and she seemed flustered, her eyes darting around.

…?

When I reached out my hand again, Luna snapped back to her senses and handed me the clothes.

"H-Here……”

I took the clothes, tilting my head slightly in confusion.

"Let's go have dinner."

Casually, I put on the clothes Luna had handed me.

"Hmm?"

However, instead of my usual scent, I noticed a different fragrance coming from the clothes.

It smelt like Luna…

As I instinctively sniffed the clothes, Luna's eyes widened in surprise.

"Don't… Don't smell me!!!"

Suddenly, Luna tried to stop me from sniffing.

"Ah… it's my clothes, though?"

"Don't smell them anyway!"

Luna grabbed my clothes and shook them vigorously.

"Shower! Go shower! Change your clothes!!!"

“…Won't the others be waiting?"

"Uh… Uh-uh……”

Upon hearing my words, Luna's pupils shook.

"Alright, I won't smell it. Let's eat first; the others must be waiting."

"Ah… Okay."

Luna nodded, agreeing with me.

"Hmm……”

A voice came from behind, I turned and saw Professor Robert.

Professor Robert furrowed his brows as he observed us.

"What are you staring at……”

"It's nothing. Keep it up."

Professor Robert nodded a few times and began walking away.

What was he talking about?

"Shall we go now?"

"Y-yeah, let's."

We made our way towards the cafeteria, where Ena and Riku were sitting on a bench.

"Why are you guys so late?" Riku asked as soon as she spotted us.

Late?

Had Luna been waiting for a long time while I was exercising?

Feeling apologetic, I glanced at everyone.

"By the way, did you come straight here after exercising? You're filthy. You should have showered."

Riku complained.

Was that so?

Well, I did work up a sweat.

"So, shall I shower first?"

"No! We came all this way, let's eat together!"

Luna stopped me as I attempted to leave.

"Yeah, since we've already waited, let's eat first, and then you can shower. You don't seem to smell that much," Ena said, smiling.

Upon hearing that, Riku approached me and took a sniff.

"Hmm?"

"Rikuuuuuuuuu!"

As soon as Riku got close to me and sniffed, Luna rushed towards me in surprise.

Luna swiftly picked up Riku, who was near me, and moved her away.

Then Riku, clinging to Luna, started sniffing Luna's scent.

"What's going on?"

Riku had a confused expression on her face.

"Why?"

Eyes gleaming, Riku asked,

"Why does he smell like you…… uh!"

Luna quickly covered Riku's mouth.

“…Shall we go eat then?"

"Mmm!! Mmmmmm!!!!"

Luna walked away, still keeping her hand over Riku's mouth.

"…?"

I smell like Luna?

I sniffed my clothes once again.

There was a faint trace… but…

I thought it was a mistake earlier, but looks like it wasn't.

Could it be because Luna had held onto me earlier?

Lost in thought, I felt a hand on my shoulder.

Turning to the side, I saw Ena smiling like a proud father.

"Our Luna! Take good care of her!"

With those parting words, Ena hurried after Luna.

Then she called out to Riku.

"Riku! You're useful after all!"

"…???"

Still perplexed, I followed them, trying to make sense of their conversation.

CHAPTER 33
A CUP OF TEA (3)

A carriage was making its way towards the Academy.

Within the carriage sat Astina, who had just finished her duties among the nobility and was now returning.

"The academy is the most comforting place at the moment."

Astina's face showed signs of weariness due to exhaustion.

After the incident during the midterm camp, Astina attracted significant attention, leading to a very tiring schedule.

She had discussed the incident with esteemed nobles and even received personal words of gratitude from the emperor.

Now, not only did she hold a prominent position within the academy, but she had also established a firm footing in central politics.

There was nothing left for Astina to fear.

Having accumulated such remarkable accomplishments, it was only a matter of time before she inherited the title of viscount.

Through her visits to various territories in the central area, Astina had laid the groundwork necessary for her to succeed as the head of the household.

The retainers of the Persia family, had changed their stance to support her due to the incident and the accumulation of achievements over time.

All the preparations had been completed.

"Ugh…”

Having accomplished so much, Astina felt utterly drained.

"Politics is truly exhausting."

Astina grumbled in frustration.

However, she couldn't relax now.

Only by enduring such arduous tasks and giving her all could she secure her position as the head of the viscount's household.

"There shouldn't be any problems."

Astina thought of Rudy Astria and couldn't help but smile.

It was all thanks to Rudy Astria.

After all, it was he who provided all the intel during the incident.

That young man possessed extraordinary abilities.

An immense wealth of information.

The same was true during Luna's library incident and now during the midterm camp.

During Luna's incident, his judgment may have been based on Luna's magic book.

However, during the midterm camp, Yeniel attempted to assassinate Astina.

With that alone, Rudy had deduced the entire situation.

It's not something an ordinary person could do in such a limited space and with such little information.

Naturally, questions arose.

How much does he know?

However, she didn't pry.

Everyone had secrets and their own private lives.

She was simply grateful that he was on her side.

"We'll be arriving soon."

"Okay."

Astina replied to the coachman with a smile.

* * *

After finishing my classes, I began tidying up my books. After quickly organizing them, I prepared to head to lunch.

"Rudy Astria."

Just as I was about to step out of the classroom to search for Luna, I heard my name being called.

"Hmm?"

Turning towards the voice, I saw Locke standing there.

It was a bit puzzling since Locke, who usually had little to no interaction with me.

"What is it?"

While we had grown closer during the midterm camp, we didn't have many chances to interact at the academy.

Since we were in different departments, there was no reason to see each other unless it involved Rie, and neither of us seemed interested in becoming close friends.

"Astina senior is looking for you."

"Astina? She's back?"

"She's currently in the student council room with Princess Rie. You should go see her."

"Is that so?"

I was about to make my way there when I realized something.

If I went straight to the student council room, Luna would be waiting for me, wouldn't she?

Since we always had lunch together, she would probably be looking for me.

I stared intently at Locke.

“…What?"

Hmm…

After a moment's thought, I figured out a use for Locke.

"Hey, could you do me a favor?"

Upon hearing my request, Locke furrowed his brows.

"If it's something similar to what you asked at the camp, I decline."

"No, it's a simple task."

Locke glared at me before speaking.

"What is it?"

"Could you please inform Luna that I might not be able to join her for lunch?"

A messenger.

Locke was the perfect candidate for such a role.

* * *

"Ah, Rudy Astria. You've arrived?"

"Why are you so late?"

Upon entering the student council room, I was greeted by Astina and Rie.

Rie's words had a slightly different undertone, but I accepted it as her unique way of showing hospitality.

"Did you handle everything well?"

Astina responded with a pleasant smile.

"Perfectly."

Seeing Astina in such high spirits brought me relief.

"Take a seat for now and have some tea."

Astina gestured towards the tea set on the desk.

I settled down and spoke.

"So, what comes next?"

"Now that the groundwork has been laid, it's merely a matter of executing the plan."

Astina's plan.

It was simple but challenging.

To overthrow her older brother, the current heir of the Persia family.

Replacing someone who had already established themselves in that position was no easy feat.

"Do you think you can do it?"

"We'll simply have to try. If it doesn't work out, we'll need to explore other avenues."

Though she said that, it seemed like she had received favorable responses from the noble families.

The process of becoming an heir varied from family to family, but there was a

common element in most cases.

If the head of the family and the vassal families supported a particular heir, it was sufficient. There was no need for further competition.

While some families adhered to certain traditions, this approach was prevalent in most cases.

"Soon, the other families will propose the idea to my father—to change the heir."

Astina's family, the Persia family, had already chosen an heir.

To alter such a decision, they needed the surrounding vassals.

I believed that Astina had handled it well, so it didn't seem like something I needed to worry about.

Besides, there was no part where I could offer assistance.

However, there was a concern.

Astina was still in her second year at the academy.

Although she surpassed the average abilities of third-year students and seemed to be on par with a teacher's assistant.

The timing is much faster than any of us anticipated.

The dilemma lay in whether it was the right time for Astina to assume control of the family.

Originally, Astina was meant to take over a bit later.

However, we've accelerated the process greatly.

I couldn't help but worry about the potential side effects of Astina inheriting the family at an earlier stage.

But it'd be a waste to go against the natural flow of events.

This opportunity really couldn't get much better.

So, I came to a conclusion.

I would support Astina in inheriting the family and we'd have to use her newfound authority to take care of any resulting uncertainties.

With the authority of the dukedom at her disposal, it would be much easier to address any unpredictable circumstances.

"And, as you've likely heard from Rie, I've taken care of everything concerning Evan."

"Ah, thank you."

There was a reason why Astina needed to grow stronger.

Astina never questioned my actions.

She had doubts, but she refrained from voicing them.

She simply acted as I requested.

I wasn't sure whether to label this trust or something else, but it certainly created a comfortable dynamic between us.

I wasn't sure if Astina's compliance stemmed from trust or just favorable circumstances, but it worked in my favor nonetheless.

Thus, I could freely manipulate the situation as I saw fit.

While I knew I would need the help of others to steer the story in the best direction, not everyone would be as accommodating.

I needed to empower Astina and make the utmost use of her capabilities.

"Shall we proceed to the main point now?"

“…The main point?"

Hadn't we been discussing the main point already?

It seemed important enough.

Astina crossed her legs and spoke up.

"You were already anticipating this much, weren't you?"

Astina flashed a sly smile.

She wasn't mistaken.

Astina wouldn't let such an opportunity slip by. Her abilities spoke for themselves.

So, what was the main point?

I felt a sense of unease.

Had I missed something?

I honestly thought there were no major issues so far.

Although my actions had slightly altered the plot, the overall framework remained unchanged.

I still hold the second seat, and I've dealt with the incidents in a similar manner.

Could the concern revolve around Evan?

Since I haven't had a proper conversation with him, I don't know if he views me as a rival.

However, if he sees me diligently studying,

Wouldn't he perceive me as a contender?

In that case, Evan would also strive to secure the first seat.

I believed there wouldn't be a major problem since I handed Evan the sword of Andrei, which he was supposed to obtain this time.

"So, what is the main point?"

I asked, still feeling tense.

But the answer I received left me dumbfounded.

"Will you continue with the Student Council?"

"The Student Council?"

I stared at Astina, caught off guard by her sudden question.

"I helped you, didn't I? During the midterm camp."

"Didn't you also benefit thanks to that, Senior Astina……”

I had no intention of continuing with the Student Council.

Didn't we make a promise?

To help only until the conclusion of the midterm camp.

I didn't need to be in the student council since we had already formed an alliance.

Moreover, with Professor Robert's training occupying my schedule, adding the responsibilities of the Student Council would be too much.

"Well, I guess there's no other option."

Astina glanced at Rie, her lips curving into a smile.

Rie silently sipped her tea.

"Hm?"

I shifted my gaze between the two.

What was this ambiguous atmosphere?

As I stood there confused, Astina smiled and spoke.

"If you don't continue with the student council, Rie said she would join instead."

“…Rie said that?"

When I turned my attention to Rie, she was sitting quietly, fixated on her teacup, serenely savoring her drink.

"Honestly, you're more fun, but I thought this situation could also be fun, so I decided to do it this way."

Astina beamed at me.

Upon hearing that, Rie set her teacup down.

"Well, if that's the case, I should be going."

"Why? Won't you join us for lunch? Rudy Astria seems to have a lot of questions, doesn't he?"

Rie's brows furrowed slightly as she glanced at me.

"It's a matter of life and death."

With those brief words, Rie opened the door.

Just as Rie was about to depart, she stopped in her tracks.

From outside, a familiar voice reached our ears.

"Oh! Rie! Hello!"

"Huh… what?"

"Hm?"

I turned my gaze toward the entrance, and there stood a familiar brunette.

"Luna?"

When I called out her name, Luna peered inside.

"Oh, Rudy, are you finished? Then let's go and eat!"

"Luna Railer?"

Upon hearing Astina's words, Luna appeared somewhat taken aback.

"Oh, hello."

Astina regarded Luna, then spoke up.

"Who's behind you?"

Behind?

From my vantage point, the door obscured my view of the figure behind Luna.

Who could be standing there?

I slightly inclined my head to catch a glimpse.

And there, behind her, a girl with blue hair came into sight.

Someone who shouldn't be here.

In the game, her nickname was Stray Cat.

The top elementalist among the first-year students.

It was Serina Rinsburg.

"What are you thinking, bringing her here?!"

…I nearly shouted.

Her sudden appearance caught me off guard.

She should never get involved with us.

She exclusively associates with Evan, never mingling with others.

Someone who should remain detached from everyone else.

That was Serina Rinsburg.

This is giving me a headache.

As we silently observed Serina, Luna spoke up, perplexed.

"Um… I saw Serina eating her lunch alone on a bench, then all of her food was taken by animals… so I felt sorry for her……"

It wasn't that her food was stolen, but rather she likely shared it with the animals…

One of the most important conditions for a elementalist is their affinity with nature.

In this sense, Serina's act of sharing food and bonding with the animals was to increase her affinity with nature.

As I found myself clutching my head, unable to utter a word, Astina summed up the situation.

"Well, this is fate as well. Let's all go and eat together."

"I won't……"

"Huh?"

Rie was about to protest, but her eyes met Luna's.

Unable to continue her sentence while gazing into Luna's innocent eyes, Rie let out a sigh.

"Sigh… let's eat somewhere other than the school cafeteria……"

Rie reluctantly gave in and sought a compromise.

Of course, I agreed with her.

I wanted to eat somewhere that wouldn't draw attention.

The student council president, the princess, the top elementalist…

Such an unbelievable combination.

If anyone caught sight of us, rumors would circulate for weeks like wildfire.

We needed to find a restaurant without people…

"Ah, right."

I just remembered a restaurant that people rarely visited.

A place with great food, too.

* * *

Robert engaged in small talk with Cromwell before he leisurely made his way to have lunch.

Since Professor Cromwell was too 'noble' to eat at a shabby restaurant, he walked alone to 'that restaurant.'

"Hmm…?"

As he neared the rundown establishment he often visited, he caught snippets of noise.

It was unusual to hear someone else's voice in a place where he was the sole regular customer.

Curiosity piqued, Robert pushed open the door to the restaurant.

“…How do you even eat this?!"

"Hmm… Its rather delicious."

Upon glancing inside, Robert spotted familiar faces.

"Why are you all here?"

Rudy Astria, Luna Railer, Princess Rie, and the others who spent time with Rudy Astria—they were all present.

One of them was a face Robert hadn't seen before, but he paid little attention to that.

The fact that there were so many people proved more bothersome.

And on top of that, one man amidst a group of women…

"Oh, Professor, hello."

As the spokesperson, Rudy Astria greeted Robert.

Robert acknowledged the greeting and rubbed his temples.

“…I have a headache."

What exactly is he doing?

It was surprising enough to witness him alternating between Princess Rie and Luna Railer during workouts, but this… This was something else.

He thought he should finish teaching Rudy magic as quickly as possible and avoid getting involved.

CHAPTER 34
HOMECOMING DAY (1)

After returning to my room, I flopped onto the bed and muttered to myself.

"I cannot shake this feeling of unease…"

Serina Rinsburg.

The daughter of the esteemed Royal Head Elementalist, possessing an overwhelming power in the early stages of the story.

But why does she wield such formidable power early on?

The answer lies in the nature of elemental magic.

Magic, in its entirety, demands numerous elements such as comprehension to understand concepts and one's responsiveness to mana.

All these factors were not entirely related to talent.

Certain aspects can be compensated for through diligent effort or financial means.

Naturally, a modicum of talent is essential for such growth, but the majority of individuals possess that minimum threshold.

Yet, when it came to elemental magic, the dynamics changed.

For elementalists, talent was everything.

A prodigious elemental wizard can be distinguished from an average one from birth.

This is because elemental affinity, paramount to an elementalist, is determined from the beginning.

Elemental affinity denotes the degree to which an elementalist can establish

contracts with elemental beings.

Should one possess low affinity, summoning an elemental becomes an insurmountable challenge.

With high affinity, it is the opposite.

Of course, summoning high-ranking elementals necessitates a sufficient mana pool to accommodate.

So high affinity is merely one of the requirements.

Elemental affinity doesn't change much no matter how hard you try.

Living in places like forests and getting along with animals could increase affinity.

However, it only gave slight improvements at most.

Moreover, investing substantial sums of money never gave returns of the same value.

Rather than trying to increase affinity, it is more common to explore methods of optimizing the utilization of the elementals already under one's command.

In that regard, Serina possessed an extraordinary aptitude.

Since birth, she exhibited a remarkable affinity for elemental magic, enabling her to summon high-ranking elementals as long as she had the necessary mana.

"The story will start soon."

However, the fact that Serina was a bully in the early stages did not help us.

Rather, it was a headache.

Because she was the boss of the story that was about to start.

The story that was swiftly approaching—Homecoming Day.

Homecoming Day was an occasion where alumni returned to the academy, fostering a gathering of graduates and current students where they enjoyed various festive

activities.

However, there was a problem with this event.

The entry of outsiders into the academy.

Although they were academy graduates, from the moment of graduation, they were practically strangers.

Moreover, most of these graduates hailed from esteemed backgrounds, inevitably bringing along entourages and escorts, expanding the influx of outsiders.

While it was true that only those with valid connections were granted entry, the event still rendered the academy's security vulnerable.

The watchful eyes of the academy's guards were divided, and their focus diverted away from the students while their attention was focused on the outsiders.

Thus, Serina saw an opportunity at this moment.

The Elemental Sword, Priscilla.

Within its hilt resided a special elemental—an ice elemental named Priscilla.

However, there was a hidden truth about Priscilla.

Priscilla had once been under the control of Serina's mother.

In short, after Serina's mother's demise, Priscilla went berserk, and the sword was used to seal her.

Now, the sword resided within the academy, serving as a subject of research.

This was the precise reason behind Serina's entry into the academy.

She sought to steal the sword, release Priscilla, and form a contract with her.

Of course, this was not the only way to encounter Priscilla.

An alternative approach involved pursuing a career as a researcher devoted to the

study of Priscilla, a path accessible only after completing the academy's curriculum.

However, Serina opted not to spend her time in that manner.

Her choice was driven by the desire to free Priscilla at the earliest opportunity.

"Well, Evan will handle it anyway…"

This matter was one that Evan had to confront on his own.

A significant event unfolded on Homecoming Day.

The saint graced the academy with their presence, imparting a prophecy regarding the academy's future.

It is given to the Student Council President.

Homecoming Day began this way.

There were several prophecies.

One of which urged caution regarding Serina.

Thus, Astina promptly relayed this information to others.

People from the academy start looking for Serina, but in the end, it is Evan who finds Serina.

Evan meets Serina like this, fights with her, and eventually wins.

There were various stories in the process, but they were not particularly important.

The prophecy concerning Serina was the only one worth paying attention to.

Many interpreted it as a warning that Serina sought to steal Priscilla.

But in fact, that was not the case.

It was just that the timing coincided well, the warning to be careful of Serina had a different meaning.

It was actually unrelated to it.

"I hope I won't need to intervene this time……"

If the story goes as it is, there was no part where I had to step in.

I might have to exert some effort when an incident related to the prophecy arises later, but there was nothing for me related to this incident itself.

The only possibility would be checking whether Evan could beat Serina or not?

But, I didn't think I really needed to do that either.

From the rumors about Evan, it seemed that he was growing well.

"I need some rest too……"

I've been working hard, so I can take a break for one story, can't I?

In this incident, I'm never even mentioned, so I think I can stay still.

"Besides."

I rose from the bed and settled into the chair.

My gaze fell upon the desk, where a lone book lay.

The magic book of Levian that Luna had given me.

"I guess it's time to start using it?"

This tome held significance in itself, but the spells contained within held great importance as well.

A compendium of a royal wizard's lifetime, it possessed a wealth of extraordinary knowledge.

Amongst its pages, what I would take were the dark magics that had not been revealed to the world.

The unexplored realm of dark magic resided within these pages.

Mainly dwelling in the shadows, dark magic had long been stigmatized as an art practiced solely by villains.

As a result, individual practitioners guarded their findings closely.

The dark magic that Levian researched, were in this book.

However, these spells were not solely reliant on the confines of the magic circle.

Magic circles served as instruments of modification, granting alterations to magic you can use.

For example, in the case of the magic circle that Luna used last time, it was a magic circle that gave a modification to the light magic.

There was a normal magic, Light, which could be used normally, and that magic was transformed through a magic circle.

Pondering my next course of action, I clasped the magic book in my hands.

"Should I show this to Professor Robert……”

I've been observing Robert for several weeks.

He struck me as a reliable individual.

Though he appeared lazy in most matters, he was more diligent than anyone in his research on dark magic.

I didn't see any significant issues in terms of his character.

Also, I could tell that Robert, despite his constant complaints to the people around him, cared for them.

He treated Professor Cromwell well, and he seemed to be on friendly terms with the old lady at the shabby restaurant.

"But just in case……”

Even though I thought he was a good person, I figured there's nothing wrong with being cautious.

I decided to show him just one magic circle before showing him this magic book.

I opened the magic book Luna gave me and pulled out a piece of paper.

Then I began to draw the magic that Luna had failed at in the library last time, using the paper beside me as a reference.

I didn't have to draw it perfectly, just showing the general idea would be enough.

“…It's more challenging than I anticipated."

However, it was nearly impossible for me, who lacks artistic skills, to draw it perfectly.

The main pattern itself was complicated, becoming more so for higher level magic.

"Um……”

After roughly tracing the pattern, I scrutinized the paper.

A sincere realization struck me: proficient drawing skills were essential for a wizard who relied primarily on magic circles.

"But… isn't it somewhat similar?"

I looked at the magic circle in the magic book and the one I drew.

It might be a bit skewed, but it was somewhat similar……

* * *

The next day, I visited Professor Robert's office and handed him the paper.

Robert stared at the paper intently before asking me,

"What is this?"

I responded calmly,

"It's a magic circle."

Robert took the paper, looked at it for a moment, and handed it back to me.

After that, he held it up to the sunlight, shook it back and forth.

I stared at Professor Robert's strange behavior.

"What are you doing……”

“……Isn't it a code?"

"It's a standard magic circle. Frequently used on scrolls for practical applications."

"……”

Professor Robert took the paper and made his way toward his desk.

Without a second thought, he discarded the paper into the wastebasket nearby.

"What kind of magic circle is this? What do you think a magic circle is?"

“……I put effort into drawing it."

I did my best.

I tried my best to replicate it, but my drawing skills were lacking.

"Even a seven-year-old child could draw better than this. How do you manage to draw magic circles in Magic Theory class?"

"Hmm…”

Initially, I attempted to draw them myself, but as the tasks grew more complex, I began relying on Luna's help.

Since Magic Theory class covers more than just magic circles, opportunities to practice drawing them were limited.

Besides, my intention wasn't to study magic using magic circles, so I sought help wherever I could.

To be honest, I only drew them for the sake of submission, and Luna would then redraw them for me.

Whenever I thought I had done a decent job and was about to submit it, Luna would always reject it.

Like a caring mother who redoes her child's drawing during an assessment, she would take over and create a new one for me.

I felt sorry for constantly burdening Luna, but according to her, it didn't take much time since she was merely copying an existing magic circle.

Observing her recreate my magic circle in less than 10 minutes, I had to admit she was right.

After discarding the paper, Robert seated himself on the sofa and inquired,

"So, what is this? What kind of magic is it?"

"I'm not entirely sure myself."

When I admitted that, Professor Robert gave me a disbelieving look.

“…Did you just give me a circle from your imagination?"

"No, it's a real magic circle that exists."

"But why don't you know? If you saw it in a book, there should be an explanation."

How should I explain this…

After pondering for a while, I made up my mind.

"I'll return another time."

“…Alright."

With that, I departed from Professor Robert's office and made my way to the library.

All I needed to do was show Luna the magic book and ask her to draw it for me.

CHAPTER 35
HOMECOMING DAY (2)

The wind blew, carrying the fragrance of blooming white lilies with it. The sweet scent wafted through the garden and gently permeated the mansion through the open windows.

The elegant white mansion stood adorned with vibrant lilies, presenting a picturesque sight.

Amidst this scene, a carriage made its way towards the mansion.

Prominently engraved on the carriage was the lily emblem, representing the Astria family.

"We have arrived," declared the coachman as a man descended from the carriage.

It was Ian Astria, the eldest son of the Astria family.

Stepping out of the carriage, he was greeted by a middle-aged man who emerged from the white mansion.

Every step the middle-aged man took exuded a dignified air. He was Perrian Astria, Rudy's father and the head of the Astria family.

Perrian cast a stern gaze at Ian, yet his words were laced with warmth.

"Son, it has been some time since I last laid eyes on you."

"I apologize, Father. The recent Rebel issues have made it difficult for me to visit the territory," Ian replied.

Perrian offered a faint smile as he regarded his son. Then, gesturing towards the mansion, he suggested, "Let us go inside and have a meal."

The two entered the mansion and engaged in conversation over a meal, discussing

recent events.

"By the way, have you heard any news from Rudy?" Ian inquired.

"Well, no news is often considered good news, isn't it?" Perrian responded.

Ian couldn't shake off a peculiar feeling.

No news from Rudy?

The Rudy he knew would have inevitably caused some kind of trouble by now. It seemed odd that there was no news at all.

"Hmm…" Ian pondered.

The Rudy he knew was notorious for his mischievous nature. He would humbly submit to those stronger than him but showed no mercy when exerting power over weaker individuals.

Emotions and fists often took precedence over reason and words for him.

It surprised Ian that such a person hailed from the prestigious Astria Duke family.

The reason for his surprise stemmed from the fact that he knew his father well.

Perrian must have had conversations with the professors at the academy, even if he didn't particularly take an interest in Rudy. To some extent, he should be concerned about his well-being.

Yet, he claimed there was no news, indicating that nothing noteworthy had occurred.

"People undergo transformations when their environment changes, don't they? It's about time for Rudy to mature, huh," Perrian chuckled cheerfully.

However, Ian held a different opinion. He believed that people weren't so easily swayed by circumstances.

"I've received an invitation from the Academy, so I think I'll go and witness it myself."

Ian had also been invited to Homecoming Day. Initially, he hadn't planned on

attending due to his busy schedule, but he had decided to make an appearance.

While Rudy lingered in his thoughts, another matter also troubled him—Astina Persia, the daughter of the Persia family.

Following the rescue of Princess Rie and the capture of the Rebels, the Persia family's actions had been rather peculiar.

Nobles associated with them were returning to their territories, back to the Persia family's domain. Their intentions were evident to anyone who paid attention—they sought to change their successor.

Hence, Ian concluded that he needed to meet with Astina.

When she last visited the capital, he was preoccupied with other affairs and couldn't interact with her separately.

Naturally, those around him met Astina and shared their impressions, but he considered those accounts mere hearsay. To truly comprehend the kind of person she was, he had to meet her himself.

If Astina had indeed saved Princess Rie, she would undoubtedly align herself with the Royalists, becoming his adversary.

"Well then, I shall attend to a few other matters," Ian announced.

"Yes, return once more before you depart for the capital," his father replied.

With a farewell to his father, Ian rose from his seat.

* * *

Meanwhile, in Professor Robert's laboratory…

“…So this time it's pretty garbage, isn't it? Who created this for you?" Robert inquired.

"Luna assisted me. And it's not garbage. It's an authentic spell."

"The magic circle itself appears to be the work of a skilled wizard, but what's the

significance of this pattern?" Robert pointed towards the center of the magic circle.

The central symbol of the magic circle caught Robert's attention.

"What kind of spell is this?"

With confidence, I responded to his question. "I brought it because I don't know. What if I use it and something significant happens?"

"So, you're suggesting that I give it a try?"

“…Well, not exactly."

In truth, that was my intention.

But would it be too harsh to say it so directly?

Robert fixed his gaze on the magic circle and began manipulating his mana.

"Are you planning to use it here?"

I was taken aback as he suddenly started casting the spell. I had assumed we would relocate to a safer location.

Robert remained silent, continuing to manipulate his mana.

"Huh…”

As Robert moved his mana, a sigh of exasperation escaped his lips.

He halted the movement of his mana and stared at me.

"Where did you obtain this magic circle?"

"I stumbled upon it," I confidently lied.

"I see, you stumbled upon this magic circle, you little…”

After uttering those words, Robert resumed moving his mana.

And the magic was unleashed.

Bang!

A black pillar emerged from the laboratory floor, reaching up towards the ceiling. It resembled a towering spire, sharp at the top and thick at the base.

"What the!"

A voice echoed from the hole in the ceiling.

Ignoring the voice, Robert approached me.

"What kind of person are you?" his eyes and voice bore a stark difference from usual.

They brimmed with a fierce, murderous intent.

"Have you met Levian? Where is he now?"

He knows Levian?

The sudden mention of Levian caught me off guard. While I had suspected he might be aware of Levian's existence, the fact that he recognized this spell posed a problem.

"Do you know Levian?" I asked.

"I won't answer that. Where did you find this magic?"

A shiver ran down my spine.

Robert's murderous intent, infused with mana, stabbed sharply at me.

I calmly pondered the situation.

Levian and Robert.

An unexpected connection.

Robert was able to cast the spell with ease after a brief examination. However, it seemed he was unaware of the meaning behind the symbol in the magic circle.

"I won't answer either. But there is one thing…”

I met Robert's gaze, looking directly into his eyes.

"I am not an enemy," I declared.

"Not an enemy…”

My words held a dual meaning. It signified that I was not an enemy to Professor Robert, nor to Levian.

Upon hearing this, Robert fell into contemplation.

Observing the pensive professor, I sincerely spoke up.

"Master, please calm down and let's talk. There's no benefit in resorting to this."

“…Sigh."

Robert let out a sigh in response to my words and relaxed. He then flung himself onto the sofa before him and took a seat.

"Sit."

Pointing to the spot opposite him, Robert invited me to join him.

As I settled down, Robert began to speak.

"First of all, I am not your master."

What is he talking about now?

"Then what am I?"

"Just a student attending the academy. I am a magnanimous professor."

“…You're teaching me, so I'm your student and you're my master, aren't you?"

"Nonsense. It's ten years too early for you to be my student."

What is he even…

Absurd as it may be, there was nothing I could do if he insisted. I decided to leave it at that.

"What is your relationship with Levian?"

To that question, Robert offered a brief reply.

"A master who taught me for a while and a nemesis."

Then he turned the question back to me.

"And what about you?"

"I'm a stranger. I just happen to know someone who has a relationship with him."

Professor Robert scrutinized me, and I met his gaze without flinching.

"So, what do you possess?"

"His grimoire."

Our conversation was brief. On the surface, it seemed like an ordinary exchange, but to me, it felt like a duel of swords.

It seemed like if I gave the wrong answer, I would be struck down.

"One final question."

A small query.

"Whose side are you on?"

I could answer this question without hesitation.

"I am on the side of the survivors."

Survival was my goal.

There was no need to align myself with those destined to perish.

I simply walked in the direction that held the best chance of survival.

Upon hearing my response, Robert let out a sigh.

Then he displayed a serene expression.

"Well, if that's the case……."

Bang!

"Robert!!!!!!!!!!!!!"

In the midst of our conversation, someone abruptly burst into the room.

"Huh?"

Professor Robert appeared on the verge of uttering something warm, but his eyes widened upon seeing the unexpected visitor.

It was Professor Mcguire who had stormed into the lab.

His usual composed demeanor had vanished, replaced by a visage distorted by anger.

"How dare you make a hole in my lab?????? You??????"

"Oh, hold on a minute… There was a reason for that."

I gazed at the lingering black pillar, a reminder of the ceiling it had pierced.

Realization struck, and I turned to Robert, my expression filled with shock.

With widened eyes, Robert motioned for me to leave.

"You caused quite a mess last time, and Cromwell let it slide, but now you've made a hole??"

Carefully avoiding Professor Mcguire's attention, I rose from my seat.

"You! Let's settle this with a fight to the death today, you brat!!!!"

Silently, I exited the room.

CHAPTER 36
HOMECOMING DAY (3)

Persia Family, Conference Room

Seated at the head of the conference room was the head of the Persia family, with about ten people gathered in front of him.

Among them was Harpel Persia, Astina's older brother.

He was there not as the heir, but as the captain of the Persia family knights.

"So it has come to this…"

The head let out a deep sigh, his eyes filled with regret as he looked at Harpel.

Observing the head's expression, the person standing next to him spoke up.

"The decision to change the heir has been approved by 8 members, with 1 abstaining and 1 objecting."

Upon hearing this, the head rose from his seat.

"Thank you all for attending. Food has been prepared at the mansion, so please have a meal before you depart."

With a weary countenance, the head left the room.

The others in the room turned their attention to Harpel, awaiting his reaction.

Harpel glanced at them and asked, "What are you looking at?"

Then he made his way towards the door, taking slow steps.

"I won't be joining for dinner. I'm sure it would ruin everyone's appetite, so I'll leave now."

Harpel spoke these words before departing from the room.

As he walked a short distance, a knight approached Harpel.

"Captain, what happened?"

The knight was Eric Richard, vice-captain of the Persia Knights.

"I've been dismissed."

"Dismissed…”

Anger flared in Eric's eyes.

"Those bastards…! How much have you accomplished, only to be dismissed?"

Eric expressed his agitation.

He was the son of the former captain of the Persia Knights and a friend who trained in swordsmanship alongside Harpel.

He had witnessed all of Harpel's actions and efforts thus far, which fueled his anger even more.

"Eric, calm down."

"No, how can I stay calm right now…?"

As Eric spoke, he gazed at Harpel but couldn't continue his words.

It was because Harpel's face reflected a myriad of emotions.

His teeth ground together, and his fists clenched tightly.

The one who was most angry about this situation right now was Harpel.

'What… did I do wrong… '

He had dedicated himself to the family, pouring his efforts into compensating for his shortcomings and sacrificing sleep to make up for lost time.

But all he received in return was indifference and now they were plotting to strip him of his position as the heir.

"Ast… ina."

Harpel gritted his teeth, repeating Astina's name.

She was born from the same mother, no doubt about it.

Yet, why did he lack the same abilities she possessed?

He could accept his own shortcomings, but it was difficult to bear losing the only thing he had.

"Are you… alright?" Eric asked, observing Harpel.

Harpel turned his gaze towards Eric.

"Eric."

With eyes burning with anger, he spoke.

"Where is the invitation from the Academy?"

* * *

The temperature was gradually rising, signaling the arrival of Homecoming Day and the impending final examinations.

In the meantime, several events have taken place.

First, I showed Professor Robert the magic book Luna had obtained.

Robert began researching the book, and I was able to learn a few simple spells from it.

Meanwhile, Astina smoothly succeeded in securing her position as the heir.

Her success stemmed from the solid foundation she had laid beforehand.

Astina skillfully persuaded the nobles, and Rie had previously dealt with the nobles of the capital to prevent any potential rebellion.

Although there were some minor objections, they were virtually non-existent.

In other news, Yeniel had returned to the Academy.

According to Astina, she had taken care of all issues.

I had full confidence in Astina's abilities to handle such matters, so I didn't worry too much.

The most exciting news for me was that Evan had begun learning swordsmanship.

Evan, now in possession of Andrei's sword, started his training.

This was good news, the story will progress more smoothly.

Andrei's sword was no ordinary blade.

It possessed the ability to slash mana.

Usually, to achieve such a feat, one would need to create a sword aura.

However, this particular sword had the capacity to store mana within itself, allowing for mana slashing without the need for a sword aura.

Of course, utilizing this ability required the expenditure of one's own mana. But for a wizard, who possessed ample mana compared to others, it wasn't an issue.

With this sword in his possession, facing Serina wouldn't be difficult for Evan.

Serina had never encountered a swordsman with a sword aura, nor had she ever faced a magic swordsman.

If Evan could combine his swordsmanship to cut through the elemental and unleash magic attacks, the chances of her being caught off guard were high.

It was the same in the game.

* * *

"Come on, give it your all. Isn't this what you trained for?"

"Ugh…"

Rie and I were walking together now, transporting props for the upcoming Homecoming Day.

She whistled merrily as she led the way, while I struggled with the heavy load.

"Why are you making me do this? Why not ask Locke? Why me?"

"It's your responsibility. I'm handling all the paperwork, so you can handle the manual labor."

I couldn't argue with that logic.

Rie had taken on the role of the student council secretary, relieving me of my paperwork duties.

Initially, Astina wanted me to continue as the secretary, but I refused, and in the end, Rie volunteered to take on the task.

"And Locke is busy with Astina. That's why she asked you."

I wished she had asked someone stronger than me…

The words lingered on the tip of my tongue, but I refrained from uttering them.

She had, after all, taken on the role of secretary on my behalf.

I felt a sense of pride as I carried everything.

I wouldn't have been able to lift this in the past.

My strength and stamina have greatly improved due to my consistent training.

"Hello?"

Someone called out to the both of us.

"Hmm?"

A woman stood before us, her eyes concealed by a black cloth, dressed in the attire of a nun.

She drew nearer to us, her cane gently tapping the ground.

A beautiful rosary adorned her neck, its brilliance suggested she was a person of high status.

“…Huh?"

Rie's eyes widened upon seeing the woman.

There was only one individual in the empire who possessed such distinct features.

"The Saint?"

The woman before us offered a somewhat awkward smile.

"Um… are you students? Could you perhaps tell me where the headmaster's office is?"

Both of us stared at her, wearing expressions of confusion.

Why was the Saint alone here?

I decided to respond to her question for the time being.

"If you head towards that large building over there and go to the third floor, you should find it."

"Oh, thank you."

The Saint responded with a radiant smile to my words.

She was about to depart but hesitated for a moment.

Then, she fixed her gaze intently on me.

"By any chance, are you Rudy Astria?"

What?

Why was my name suddenly brought up?

"Do you know me…?"

The Saint was a character who rarely appeared in the game.

Even without her presence, the story wouldn't be affected much.

The events she was involved in didn't revolve around her, nor was she at the center of them.

Hence, I knew nothing about this person.

"Well… no. I was just curious and asked. Well then, take care."

The Saint uttered those words and walked away nonchalantly.

"What was that?"

As I was about to leave, Rie tugged at my sleeve.

"Hey… doesn't that seem strange to you?"

"What do you mean?"

"Wasn't the Saint supposed to be blind?"

I tilted my head in confusion at Rie's remark.

Wasn't that obvious?

She had black cloth covering her eyes.

And since she was tapping the ground with her cane, I naturally assumed she was

blind.

"But she knows where the largest building is and heads straight for it?"

"Huh?"

Observing the Saint's back, I noticed she was proceeding toward the main building with remarkable ease.

"What's going on?"

Both of us stared at her, thoroughly bewildered.

* * *

The following day.

The Academy's interior was adorned like a lively festival.

It wasn't setup like a real festival, with little shops side by side.

It was simply decorated more than usual.

Additionally, there were various activities scattered around that the graduates could enjoy.

It was a gathering that had the atmosphere of a festival where both graduates and students could have fun together.

"Rudy!"

Luna approached with a radiant smile.

Originally, everyone seemed to be occupied, so he had planned to explore on his own.

This was his first time attending such a festival, and he had hoped to run into Evan and Serina.

But then, Luna had come to see him the day before.

-Um… Rudy, what are you planning to do tomorrow?

-Are you going to explore? Yeah?

-I have something I want to do… but it feels a bit awkward to go alone…

-Ah! Riku and Ena said they were busy because they wanted to meet some seniors… If it doesn't work out, I'll ask someone else…

-Really? You'll come with me?

How could he refuse when Luna asked in such a way?

However, it seemed that Luna had been fighting with Riku and Ena lately.

Why were those two so busy?

Every time Luna wanted to do something, they always seemed occupied.

Honestly, Luna, who was always studying, should be the busy one, not them.

Were they excluding her?

But whenever he wasn't around, the three of them were always together.

"Rudy, is something bothering you?"

While he was pondering, Luna gazed at him innocently.

Looking at her face, his worries vanished.

There was no way they would ostracize someone as kind as her, right?

"No, not at all. Actually, it's about to start soon. Let's go."

"Okay!"

The two of them made their way to the central auditorium to witness the event that marked the beginning of Homecoming Day.

CHAPTER 37
HOMECOMING DAY (4)

Astina was slowly making preparations to leave the student council room.

"Rie, do you know where the Saint is?" she asked.

"I heard she's in the central auditorium talking with others. But I don't need to stick around here any longer, right?" Rie responded with a hint of impatience.

"That's fine. Go enjoy yourself. There shouldn't be any significant problems."

"I'm not going to 'enjoy' myself. I'm going to work~."

With that, Rie was the first to leave the student council room.

Astina watched her leave, then tidied up the documents scattered across her desk and exited the room as well.

She strolled towards the central auditorium without any particular worries.

Today was a less demanding day compared to most.

The only tasks were to receive a mandate from the Saint and converse with the graduates.

There were no specific documents to deal with.

Receiving the mandate wasn't a complex matter either.

It merely involved obtaining a blessing from the Saint and communicating the contents of the mandate to the people.

And despite its name, it wasn't as though she was hearing the voice of God directly.

It was merely echoing the facts the Saint had informed her of.

Typically, it contained only ceremonial content.

Conveying that everyone in the academy was doing well and that the academy would continue to prosper shouldn't be problematic.

It had always been that way.

They hold this event annually; how could anything change?

It would be odd if the future changed every year.

As she mused about this, she reached the central auditorium.

Graduates and professors were already gathered near the auditorium, engaged in conversations.

The Saint was at the center of the largest group.

As Astina approached, the graduates greeted her. "Isn't that the Student Council President?" one remarked.

"Yes, I'm Astina Persia, this year's Student Council President," Astina responded with a smile.

The graduates laughed and approached her.

Their talk was simple—comments about the demanding job of the Student Council President and her hard work—but there was a deeper meaning to it.

Now that Astina had assumed the role of the heir, it was essential to make her presence known.

As they conversed, the Saint approached Astina. "Hello. I am the Saint, Haruna."

"Ah, I am Astina Persia, the heir to the Persia family and the current Student Council President."

Astina confidently introduced herself, making her presence known among the people surrounding her.

As she briefly greeted the Saint, a sound indicating the start of the event began to resonate.

The Saint, with a smile, gestured towards the back of the auditorium.

"Shall we go in now? It seems like it's about to start."

"Yes, let's do that."

Accepting the Saint's suggestion, Astina walked alongside her towards the back of the auditorium.

As they entered, the Saint handed Astina a note.

"It's a note about the future."

"A prophecy?"

"Most people refer to it that way."

She frowned at the Saint's cryptic words.

"So, should I look at it now?"

"Yes~. If you wish to read it, you can."

Astina was somewhat apprehensive but opened the note regardless.

The contents were mostly ordinary.

It noted there might be various hardships at the academy, but that everyone could overcome them—something anyone might say.

As Astina read, her eyes stopped at the last item.

"What is… this?"

The content was not something to be overlooked lightly.

"Are you saying this is going to happen?"

"I never specified what is going to happen, did I?"

The Saint playfully answered Astina's question.

Indeed, there was nothing specific mentioned in the note. Just a word of caution.

But, that cautionary note itself implied something was going to occur.

"So is this the will of the gods? Do you expect me to announce this to everyone?"

To utter such content in front of them all wouldn't go unnoticed.

The audience wasn't just academy students and professors, but also outsiders.

If she mentioned this, rumors could spread both within the academy and beyond.

Upon Astina's statement, the Saint tilted her head, seemingly puzzled.

"The will of the gods… I'm not certain about that. And I've never told you to announce the future I revealed to everyone, have I?"

"……What?"

What was she talking about?

The more Astina heard the Saint's words, the more doubts arose.

These doubts were fundamental to the ritual of receiving a prophecy from the Saint.

"I merely reveal the future I see to the student chosen by the academy."

"So… You're saying I don't have to mention the content in this note?"

"Whether or not you announce it is up to you, President."

Astina clenched the note tightly, staring at the Saint.

"Are you saying that handling this is my responsibility alone?"

It seemed an irresponsible thing to say, but Astina considered the possibility.

After all, she was the one who had been handed the choice so casually.

"Are you suggesting I go against the will of the gods…"

As Astina said this, the Saint regarded her with a smile.

She slightly lifted the veil that covered her eyes, revealing her right eye.

"……?"

Astina was met with a direct gaze from her right eye.

It was a vibrant eye that hadn't lost its color, unlike the eyes of the blind.

"Do you really believe this is the will of the gods? Or rather…"

The Saint posed a question to a puzzled Astina.

"Do you believe in God?"

After a moment, the announcer's voice resonated, marking the beginning of the ceremony.

The Saint covered her eyes again with the black veil she held and spoke.

"Now it's time for you to go up."

At the Saint's words, Astina moved to ascend the stage.

And she continued to contemplate.

Should she reveal this truth?

Or should she keep it hidden, bearing it alone?

Astina's mind turned these questions over and over as the event proceeded.

"Next, we have the baptism ceremony."

Was it really correct to choose to hide it?

"This baptism not only signifies a blessing for the student council president but also serves as a blessing for the entire academy."

Would it be better to reveal it to everyone?

Applause erupted!

Having received the baptism, Astina rose from her seat and moved forward.

"Next, we will proceed with the prophecy."

Now it was time to pass on the prophecy to the people.

Astina stood in her position and looked out at the crowd in front of her.

"I will now pass on the prophecy."

In front of her stood noble children, some of whom had already inherited their family's status.

There were researchers who specialized in specific fields and those who held professorships.

Knights, wizards, and alchemists alike were present.

People from all walks of life stood before Astina.

"Liberion Academy has faced many crises so far, but we have always overcome them."

Astina remembered the contents she had read and slowly began to recite them.

"There will always be dangers, but we will overcome them all."

The speech was formal, much like the prophecies that had come before.

As she recited what she had seen, her eyes met with someone in the crowd.

Rudy Astria.

He was watching her alongside Luna Railer.

“…that concludes my speech."

Internally, Astina sighed.

'Alright, you figure it out yourself this time.'

Astina swallowed hard, leaving the last prophecy unspoken.

She made her decision.

She chose not to reveal that final prophecy.

The content of that prophecy was…

“…that concludes the content of the prophecy."

It read, 'Be wary of Rudy Astria.'

* * *

At that moment, carriages began to pull up at the academy's front gate.

The event was already underway, but it was not uncommon for some to arrive late due to pressing schedules.

Two guards rushed towards the arriving carriages.

One held a list of the academy's graduates, while the other approached a carriage, knocked on its door, and asked, “Who's there?”

There was a process in place to confirm identities, as impersonators could potentially pose a risk.

A man inside the carriage opened the door.

Presenting the invitation from the academy to the guard, the man announced, “I am Harpel Persia.”

The guard who had knocked accepted the invitation, while the other guard referred to the list.

Upon receiving a nod from the guard with the list, the guard at the door greeted the man in the carriage, “Welcome to Liberion Academy. Please, proceed.”

Harpel re-entered the carriage and proceeded into the academy grounds.

“The next one may proceed.”

Following the previous routine, the next carriage stopped in front of the guards.

And the door of the carriage swung open.

As soon as the door opened, the individual inside inquired of the guard, “Was the person who just entered Harpel Persia?”

“Uh…?”

Upon seeing the man's face, the guard who had knocked froze, momentarily unable to respond.

The guard clutching the list looked at the man before him with puzzlement.

Then, the man in the carriage reiterated his question.

“I asked if it was Harpel Persia.”

“Ye… Yes, it was!”

At the man's insistence, the guard standing before him responded loudly.

“Alright, got it.”

Subsequently, the man extended his invitation.

As the guard at the back was preparing to cross-reference the list, the guard in front halted him with his hand.

Then he exclaimed loudly.

“Welcome to Liberion Academy!!!”

With that, the man shut the carriage door, and the vehicle proceeded into the academy.

After observing the carriage enter the academy grounds, the guards returned to their posts.

Curiosity piqued, the guard holding the list asked the guard standing in front.

“Senior, why didn't we check? Don't we need to verify his identity?”

Then, the guard standing in front glared at him sharply.

“Have you lost your senses? Didn't you recognize him?”

“Who was he?”

“That was Ian Astria. We were instructed to remember the faces of such distinguished individuals.”

The senior guard explained, frustration evident in his tone.

“Ah… That person is…”

“Let's discuss this later.”

The junior guard checked the list; the face of the man who had just departed was depicted right above the name Ian Astria.

CHAPTER 38
HOMECOMING DAY (5)

“...that concludes the prophecy," the words hit me hard.

Had the prophecy changed?

Did Astina change her mind?

I didn't see this coming at all.

Serina and Astina were unrelated.

That's why Astina could name Serina in the prophecy without hesitation.

But why did she choose differently now?

I recalled the time they had lunch together.

Could that be the cause?

Was the simple act of sharing a meal an issue?

It seemed insignificant.

But seeing the consequences unfold, it was disturbing.

Could one meal have swayed Astina's choice?

However, this wasn't the worst-case scenario.

The change in the prophecy hadn't affected Evan.

He was likely alone, training by the Elementalist Department building.

That building wasn't for events; it was a quiet space, perfect for training.

Evan wasn't the festival type, nor did he have friends to celebrate with.

His usual companions in the original were Rie, Serina, and Yeniel.

With Luna's hidden route, she could've been among them as well, but I stepped in.

With the story of the midterm camp changed, Rie is excluded as well.

That meant Evan's companions were now only Serina and Yeniel.

"Will things go according to plan…?"

If these two were his only companions, Evan wouldn't be anywhere else.

Serina was probably off securing Priscilla, while Yeniel had other worries.

There was no reason for Evan's actions to differ.

For now, Serina should be carrying out her usual plan.

Priscilla was in the Elementalist Department building.

If Evan was training near there, he'd easily spot Serina entering. There shouldn't be any problems.

"Rudy, should we start leaving? I think we've seen everything," Luna suggested, looking my way.

Looking around, I saw others were leaving the auditorium too.

"Luna, I apologize, but could I meet Senior Astina for a moment?"

"Huh? Senior Astina? Sure, there's no hurry."

With Luna's consent, we headed straight to the back of the auditorium.

Meeting Astina was the top priority.

I needed to understand the situation and act quickly.

As we moved towards the back, the atmosphere became quiet, contrasting the bustling outside.

Not a single soul was around, I presume everyone had left already.

Entering the waiting room, I saw Astina, seated on a chair, deep in thought.

"Astina, senior."

"Hello!"

Luna and I greeted Astina with cheer and approached her.

"Um… Luna and… Rudy Astria."

Astina sounded subdued as she acknowledged us.

"Is something wrong?"

I asked, scrutinizing her demeanor.

She might be worried about Serina.

Her dull expression clearly indicated that something was off.

But it felt strange.

Astina wasn't the kind to let emotions overpower her.

She had even casually overthrown her own brother.

However, she was fond of those close to her.

Even then, the time she had spent with Serina was too short for them to be friends.

I was puzzled as to why she would make such a decision.

"Oh, it's nothing. I'm just a bit tired."

Astina offered a weak smile in response.

She then stood up and started to tidy up what appeared to be student council items before addressing us.

"So, why did you two come here?"

"I came to see how you're doing. You didn't look well during the announcement."

This was true.

Knowing the prophecy from the game, Astina's expression visibly dimmed when she uttered those final words.

"Hmm, is that so? The workload has been making me feel exhausted lately. I didn't realize it showed."

Astina shrugged it off as trivial and continued packing.

She didn't seem eager to discuss the prophecy either.

Luckily, the prophecy didn't significantly alter this storyline.

After Evan defeats Serina, those who heard the prophecy start to gather at the site.

These people attempt to capture Serina, but Evan defends her.

As Evan blocks their way, the headmaster steps in and defuses the situation.

Even if this incident doesn't occur, it wouldn't cause major problems, so I was considering letting it go.

"Would you like some help since you're tired?"

Luna offered to help Astina, who was packing up.

"Um! Thank you, Luna."

I joined Luna in cleaning up the room.

As we were doing so, we heard approaching footsteps.

The clack of a man's dress shoes filled the air.

Both Luna and Astina sensed the unusual atmosphere.

"Is someone supposed to be here now?"

"I only know about the person responsible for the hall."

The sound grew louder.

I noticed the footsteps weren't alone.

It seemed like two people were approaching.

The footsteps stopped right outside the waiting room we were in.

Knock, knock.

"Is the student council president in?"

"Who's there? Please, come in."

The door swung open, revealing a man in a suit with a knight by his side.

"Uh…"

I was completely taken aback at the sight of the man.

There, standing before me, was my older brother, Ian Astria.

"Um…? Rudy?"

Luna looked at me as I recoiled in surprise.

"Why didn't you tell me you were coming? I would have come to meet you."

"No, if I announced my arrival, it would have stirred unnecessary chaos."

Ian replied calmly, then shifted his gaze towards me in the back.

"I didn't anticipate Rudy being here. I was hoping to see you, even if just for a moment."

"Who is he?" Luna whispered to me.

I swallowed hard and replied quietly, "He's my older brother."

Luna looked surprised and glanced back and forth between me and Ian.

Before I could dwell on Luna's reaction, I had something important to decide.

How should I address my older brother?

In the game, there were very few scenes where Rudy Astria and Ian Astria interacted.

So, I was unsure about how I should treat or address my older brother.

Naturally, I knew that their relationship wasn't especially close.

However, I couldn't be disrespectful to my brother here.

First things first, I greeted him.

"It's been quite some time, brother."

I kept my tone courteous.

Rudy Astria was submissive towards the strong and domineering towards the weak.

Therefore, he wouldn't have been rude to his older brother.

Observing my behavior, Ian gave a slight smile.

"You seem to be doing better than I expected."

"Haha…"

Ian didn't react further and turned to Astina.

"Looking around, I can tell you've put in a lot of effort in your preparations."

"Thank you. We did our best to make a good impression on our guests."

"I can see that. I was once the student council president myself, so I understand."

Ian struck up conversation with Astina.

He asked her about her experiences as the student council president and even provided a few pieces of advice.

It was a somewhat unexpected development.

Would my presence here cause any issues?

Regardless, I decided to stay alert.

While talking, Ian gestured to the knight standing behind him.

"Oh, by the way, allow me to introduce someone."

"This is Thomas, the captain of the Astria family's knights."

"Pleasure to meet you," said the knight named Thomas, extending his hand for a handshake.

Astina reciprocated by reaching out and shaking his hand.

"Hmm?"

As Thomas and Astina shook hands, a subtle glow emitted from the glove he wore.

It was a faint shimmer, visible only from where I stood.

Raising my gaze to Ian, I was met with a small smile.

What was he planning?

Suddenly, a voice echoed within my mind.

-Stay quiet.

Ian's voice?

Heeding his directive, I stayed silent, my eyes fixed on him.

Then, Ian started speaking while looking at Astina.

"I believe it's time for me to depart. I've extended my greetings and seen my younger brother."

"Don't you want to greet the professors?"

"They wouldn't be comfortable with my presence, so it would only cause inconvenience. Well, I should be on my way. It was a pleasure meeting you."

Ian turned to leave.

"Ah."

He paused briefly to look back at Astina.

"By the way, I noticed a slight issue at the Elementalist Department building on my way here."

"Oh, I'll make sure to check on that."

"Good. Take care then."

Leaving those words behind, Ian exited the room.

The Elementalist Department building…

Evan was at the training ground by that building.

With the change in the announced prophecies, a complication has come up.

It's unlikely that everything would proceed smoothly.

* * *

Ian strolled towards the carriage, a smirk gracing his lips.

"What a serious young man," he murmured to himself.

His gaze drifted towards the Elementalist Department building.

"It's quite entertaining to watch siblings at odds…"

Upon his arrival, Ian had been watching Harpel for a while.

Exiting the carriage, Harpel made his way towards the Elementalist Department building with a knight in tow.

The only building excluded from the event.

Ian could already guess what they were up to.

This place was no different from Astina's stronghold.

Trying to gain political leverage here would be nothing short of suicidal.

There was only one other plausible reason.

Revenge.

"I had thought of Harpel as a reasonably good friend," Ian chuckled.

Given Astina's nature, she would personally look into any problems that came up.

That's why he hinted at the Elementalist Department building, where Harpel was headed.

Even if he hadn't mentioned it, Harpel would have found a way to draw Astina there.

He had merely guided Astina in that direction.

To set the stage for their clash.

And he had prepared a little gift for Harpel.

He had cast a spell on Astina, one that wouldn't leave a discernible trace.

Given Harpel's competence as a knight, he would be able to handle the situation well given the opportunity.

"It would be delightful if they each lost an arm in the fight."

And Ian had one more reason to be happy about.

Rudy Astria.

He had assumed Rudy to be a fool, but it seemed like he had been forming connections.

It felt as though a useful tool had been forged.

"It was a good idea to come here."

With a wicked smile, Ian stepped into the carriage.

CHAPTER 39
HOMECOMING DAY (6)

Near the Elementalist Department's building…

"Astina…”

A voice gritted out, scanning the area.

It was Harpel Persia.

Beside him, stood Eric, concern etched on his face.

"No turning back now."

Harpel's fist clenched.

"Losing to her… what's left for me?"

His goal? Assassinate Astina.

Yet, killing Astina without a trace was far from easy.

He had no choice.

If he could kill Astina unnoticed, he'd have his revenge and restore his status as the successor.

This thought consumed him.

His plan was reckless, his loathing for Astina had fogged his sight, blinding him to anything else.

"Haaah…”

A sigh escaped Eric.

Harpel was once an intelligent and well-mannered friend.

Now…

He'd lost his rationality and was incapable of making sound judgments.

Despite numerous attempts to discourage him, Harpel was deaf to his words.

Still, Eric couldn't desert his friend.

This man was not only his friend but also his chosen lord.

Since he had made this choice, Eric planned to stick with Harpel until the bitter end.

Even if it led to their ruin.

Fortunately, there were no problems so far.

They'd thought up ways to move without drawing attention, but thankfully, Ian Astria showed himself.

It became simple to get to this point.

"Eric, take me to the spot you mentioned."

“…Alright."

As an academy alumnus, Eric was familiar with the nearby amenities.

Close to the Elementalist Department building, there was an indoor training field.

The facilities were decrepit, attracting few visitors.

This training field, more like a hall, had limited windows and poor air circulation. Its location at the academy's far end made it less accessible.

However, these elements were perfect for their plan.

If they lured Astina here and killed her, it would be some time before anyone found her.

One would have to go through the Elementalist Department building first.

And being situated at the academy's edge, they could easily make it outside.

"Huh?"

As they neared the location, they spotted a boy focused on sword practice.

Sweat dripped from his brow as he swung his sword.

Seeing someone train amid the ongoing event brought a pang of nostalgia.

It reminded him of his own training sessions with Harpel at the academy.

"First things first…"

Although he sympathized with the boy, their mission was the priority.

"Hey, student."

"Yes…?"

The boy was Evan.

Unable to find a proper training site, he had picked this isolated location.

"I need to use this space. Could you clear off?"

Eric's request made Evan cock his head in puzzlement.

"I thought this area wouldn't be used during the event…"

"Ah, the academy thought it would difficult to keep everything in the main building, so they reassigned a part of it here."

"Oh… I understand."

Without any doubts, Evan gathered his sword and items.

"Alright. Good luck with your task."

"Right, thank you."

Eric watched Evan depart and placed his bag down.

He pulled out the scrolls he had prepared, bracing himself for Astina, a formidable opponent.

* * *

Central Auditorium.

The moment Ian exited, I turned to Astina and said,

"Show me your hand."

"What are you talking about?"

I seized Astina's hand and examined it from all angles.

There had certainly been a peculiar glow earlier…

"What… What are you doing?"

As I inspected Astina's hand, she regarded me with a baffled look.

"Rudy!!"

Luna flailed her arms wildly.

"That's not allowed!"

Luna's reaction brought a blush to my cheeks.

"I'm sorry."

"No, it's okay."

Letting go of her hand, Astina withdrew hers and cleared her throat.

"Um… Are you feeling alright? Any issues with your body? Since the handshake…"

"Handshake?"

Astina appeared puzzled as she stared at me.

She examined her own hand with keen interest.

"I don't notice anything odd."

"Um…"

What did he do?

It didn't seem like a spell that would be helpful to us.

Given he used a transmission spell to keep it concealed.

"Anyways, we should inspect the Elementalist Department building."

"In that case, I'll investigate the building."

"You will?"

"You seem tired, Astina, and it doesn't look like there's anyone else to ask."

There was no one else in sight we could ask.

However, this was merely an excuse.

I needed to confirm if the storyline was unfolding as expected.

In the original game, it was an event no one else could interfere with, so I thought everything would be okay.

But I had miscalculated.

Given things were already straying from the game, I shouldn't have expected a straightforward trajectory.

"Wouldn't it be wiser to consult the Student Council?"

"The Student Council is swamped, so I'll just go and check. If there's trouble, I'll call for assistance."

As I shared my thoughts, Astina pondered briefly before nodding.

"No, I'll accompany you."

“…Excuse me?"

I was surprised.

"Who can tell what might happen, and if something does, we'd be better equipped to handle it swiftly, right?"

"Well… I guess so."

"Then, we should go together."

Astina put her belongings aside and took the initiative.

Her ambiguous expression concerned me, but I couldn't read her thoughts.

Then Luna, who was behind me, tugged at my arm.

"Um… Rudy…!"

Turning to Luna, I saw a frown on her face.

"I thought we were going to explore together."

"Ah… right…”

"You're always so focused on work! You need to take a break sometimes!"

Luna placed her hands on her waist and lectured me.

Feeling guilty, I shot Luna an apologetic glance, and she replied with a gentle smile.

"I'll overlook it this time as you're handling important business. I'll help too, so let's wrap this up quickly and have some fun."

"Alright, thanks for your concern."

"No worries!"

A faint smile tugged at my lips.

Seeing Luna worry about me in this way…

I should resolve this quickly and make some time for relaxation.

It wouldn't take much time.

I only needed to investigate the perimeter of the buildings and the training field.

My objective was to check whether Evan was at the training field.

"Let's get going, then."

* * *

We moved towards the Elementalist Department building.

The surroundings appeared normal.

There was no reason for event participants to venture into this area.

“…Something doesn't feel right?"

Astina knitted her brow, scanning the vicinity.

Luna and I didn't detect anything out of place, so we glanced at Astina.

"What's the matter?"

I asked, and Astina surveyed the area before responding.

"Someone activated a scroll nearby. I sensed the presence of two… I believe."

"A scroll?"

There was no sensible reason for a scroll to be deployed here.

Neither Serina nor Evan used scrolls for battle.

They favored trusting their own senses rather than gaining a tactical advantage with scrolls.

A vague feeling of unease started to trickle in.

"Do you know where it was triggered?"

"I can't provide that detail. I merely detected a faint mana fluctuation."

Mana fluctuation…

"Should we make our way to the training ground then? It seems we haven't checked that location yet."

We had performed a cursory search of the area, but we had yet to explore the training ground.

Being located in a remote area, it was rarely visited by students from the magic department.

"Shall we head there?"

We moved towards the training ground.

my heart plummeted at the sight that greeted us.

Only two men were inside.

Evan… was conspicuously absent.

When the two men noticed us, they gave off ominous chuckles.

One of them advanced, moving closer to us.

"Hehe… We didn't expect you to wander here alone."

"Why are you here?"

Astina leveled them with a penetrating glare.

"Rudy, Luna, go fetch the others."

As Astina issued her command, the second man ripped the scroll he held in his hand.

Instantly, a transparent barrier materialized, obstructing the entrance.

"Once you're in, there's no escape."

Astina heaved a deep sigh and fixed her gaze on the man before her.

"Do you really believe this will change anything?"

"Whether it does or not is yet to be determined."

The two stood in a standoff, an air of hostility pervading the space.

Amidst this tense situation, my mind was preoccupied with another worry.

Where had Evan vanished to?

"Astina, you could never understand. You've been spoon-fed since your birth."

Why were these men here?

Did Evan run into Serina?

"I loathe you, Astina. Despite the fact we share the same blood…"

"Pardon me…"

I chimed in, interrupting the man's rant.

I didn't have the luxury to listen to the petty stories of an extra at this moment.

"Was anyone training here?"

At my question, the man who had been spouting nonsense sneered.

"Heh… You're fearless, aren't you?"

"No… Was anyone training here?"

I need an answer urgently.

There would be problems if Evan didn't stop Serina.

Even with someone safeguarding Priscilla, I doubt they could hold her off for long.

Evan had managed to win against Serina but most of the guards were currently stationed at the main building, leaving no one in the Elementalist Department building competent enough to handle her.

The professors would also be busy meeting graduates at the main building.

However, if Serina secures Priscilla and forms a contract… It'll be a disaster.

"It's impolite to interrupt."

The other man frowned, visibly annoyed.

His attitude made me clench my teeth.

"Haa…"

And I gathered mana in my hand.

This wasn't the moment to be bothered by these idiots.

If they wouldn't respond…

"Then shut up and come at me."

I spat out at them and unleashed my magic.

CHAPTER 40
HOMECOMING DAY (7)

"Finger of the Demon."

A towering pillar of black surged, engulfing Harpel and Eric.

Astina was taken aback.

She had intended to talk to her brother, but Rudy was wasting no time at all.

Astina wasn't the only one caught off guard by this.

"Argh!"

"Huff!"

Thanks to their combat experience, Eric and Harpel flung themselves aside, evading the unexpected magical assault.

Harpel exclaimed in shock,

"What… what is this! Eric, didn't you use a scroll to weaken magic?"

"A single scroll can't block all magic. It only weakened Astina's telekinetic magic."

Seizing the opportunity, Rudy continued casting magic.

"Abyssal Flame."

"Harpel! It's dark magic! Don't attempt to block it, dodge it!"

"Argh!"

In their frantic state, they struggled to evade.

"Wind Blaster."

Harpel failed to fully evade Rudy's magic and was sent flying sideways, struck by the spell.

"Harpel!"

Eric cried out, his voice filled with concern.

However, he couldn't rush to his aid.

He knew that if he hurried over, he would become the next target.

"Ugh…!"

Harpel groaned, struggling to rise from the ground.

But he had to keep rolling to avoid Rudy's continuous barrage of magic, unable to regain a stable footing.

Astina stared in disbelief, her eyes wide.

Harpel and Eric were no pushovers.

Both were skilled knights capable of wielding sword aura.

Widely recognized as exceptional knights.

Yet, they were being overwhelmed.

While Rudy's surprise attack played a part, the main reason was dark magic.

Astina hadn't seen much dark magic until now.

Users of such magic were scarce, and she held no interest in magic that carried risks.

But observing the current situation, she realized her prejudice against dark magic might need to be reconsidered.

"Ugh…!"

Eric swiftly charged toward Rudy.

In response, Rudy took a step back, swiftly casting another spell.

"Spikes of Hell."

Small, sharp spikes emerged from the ground, causing Eric to hesitate and ultimately step back.

Seizing the opportunity, Rudy unleashed another spell.

"Fire Wall."

A towering wall of fire erupted in Eric's direction.

Astina watched the battle with pure admiration.

She had heard of the versatility and power of dark magic.

However, what impressed her now was its unpredictability.

When Eric approached, if Rudy was using conventional magic instead, Eric might have been able to break through.

Swordsmen often enhanced their bodies with mana, giving them the ability to withstand most magical attacks and press forward, ignoring the weaker spells.

Hence, in small-scale battles, swordsmen held a significant advantage over wizards.

Yet, Rudy's dark magic nullified that advantage.

Both Eric and Harpel were well-acquainted with dark magic.

To swordsmen, dark magic was an absolute threat that they couldn't afford to underestimate.

To the untrained eye, it didn't appear different from other forms of magic, except for its darker hues.

This very aspect made it difficult to read.

If it contained an effect that restricted movement, they would lose the battle.

They couldn't risk taking a hit from dark magic.

"Luna."

Rudy called out Luna's name, his focus still fixed ahead.

"Huh, yes?"

Like Astina, Luna was also blankly watching Rudy's fight, so she responded in a fluster.

"Astina senior said those guys put a restriction on her, can you help me instead?"

“…Yes! I understand!"

Rudy didn't let the opportunity slip away while he maintained the upper hand.

"Wind Ball!"

Luna joined the fight when Rudy was already holding his own.

"Haha… truly impressive," Astina chuckled dryly at the scene.

The ease with which Rudy wielded dark magic and his astounding rate of growth took her by surprise.

Astina possessed exceptional talent herself, but she had only reached the level of intermediate magic towards the end of her first semester in the first year.

Meanwhile, Rudy was already capable of using intermediate magic effectively in actual combat.

"This is the Astria family…”

Astina expressed her genuine admiration.

* * *

"Phew…”

I released a breath I had been holding.

I was completely zoned in.

Using dark magic like this was dangerous.

Especially for someone like me who was not yet used to it.

However, I couldn't afford to hold back right now.

I needed to locate Serina as quickly as possible.

The elemental, Priscilla.

It was an immense threat.

Particularly to Serina.

Elementals can be classified into two types.

Regular Elementals and special elementals.

Regular elementals encompass the typical four elements: fire, water, wind, and earth.

These elementals are further categorized as beginner, intermediate, advanced, and supreme.

Individuals with a strong affinity for nature can form contracts with these elementals.

However, special elementals are different.

While some can be contracted and summoned through affinity and mana, others operate under completely distinct principles.

In the case of Priscilla, it doesn't require any affinity.

Instead, this elemental feeds on a person's mental and life energy.

If someone with weak mental fortitude were to form a contract with Priscilla, they would lose control as their mind crumbles.

Even after establishing a contract, there are other complications.

Using Priscilla after forming the contract continuously depletes one's mental strength.

The individual's mind will eventually collapse.

This is what led to the demise of Serina's mother.

While her mother had no issues with the contract initially, her mental deteriorated over time and her mind eventually collapsed.

No longer able to control Priscilla, the elemental went on a rampage.

Serina wouldn't be able to withstand her either.

Her mental strength is still weak.

Even later when she befriends Evan and becomes stronger mentally, she couldn't control Priscilla, let alone now.

The prophecy was a foretelling of the destruction that soon follows if we allow her to contract Priscilla.

“This damn kid……”

The two in front of me were slowing starting to counter my attacks.

I had taken them by surprise using the advantages of dark magic.

But, there was something I lacked.

A decisive blow.

I didn't have magic that could finish them off.

They would soon take control of the situation.

Although I currently have the upper hand, those guys are knights who have real experience.

What should I do now?

Both of them have already adjusted their positions, ready to counter my attacks.

In such a situation, the only thing I could do was keep firing magic.

And when my mana hits rock bottom, I'll be attacked in turn.

It's the worst situation.

I don't have the time, nor do I have the power to crush them.

Then……

"Rudy."

"What…?"

Astina stepped forward, pointing at the man who was constantly blabbering.

"Let me take over now. You just focus on that guy."

"Huh?"

I'm sure they blocked telekinetic magic with a scroll…

Then she smiled as if she knew what I was about to say.

"Just don't use telekinetic magic, right?"

Mana gathered in Astina's hand.

"Earthwave."

The ground split and stones soared up.

"What……?"

Harpel looked at the scene in surprise.

Eric quickly pushed Harpel aside and deflected the incoming rocks with his sword.

Harpel stumbled and fell to the ground.

"Ugh!"

"Kuh!"

A regular sword wouldn't have been able to withstand the impact, but his sword, infused with aura, managed to slice through the rock.

After parrying the attack, Eric turned to Harpel, who was still on the ground.

"Harpel! The scroll only blocks telekinetic magic! She can use other magic!"

"Abyssal Flame."

While Harpel was still on the ground, I took advantage and directed my spell toward Eric.

"Fireball!"

Luna also sent her magic toward him.

However, Eric swiftly maneuvered his body and swung his sword, slicing through the incoming magic with a powerful arc of aura.

"Ugh…!"

Nevertheless, he couldn't completely neutralize it.

Fragments of magic scattered and landed on his body.

The Abyssal Flame caused him pain, but he still stood strong.

Astina gazed at Eric with a mix of pity and determination.

"Eric, I apologize for having a weak brother."

Her next words carried a sharp edge.

"But I can't let this go."

Eric looked back at Astina, a smile on his face.

"I would have been disappointed if you had done otherwise."

He tightened the grip on his sword and amplified the aura pulsing through it.

Astina glanced at me, standing beside her, and spoke.

"Rudy, watch closely."

The mana in Astina's hand continued to gather, growing in intensity.

"This is how you use magic."

The spell that escaped Astina's lips was a simple one.

"Ignite."

It was the most fundamental magic of the fire attribute.

However, this was no ordinary flame.

Kwaaang!!

The circular flame unleashed by Ignite exploded magnificently.

Though it didn't possess the same force as Astina's signature telekinetic magic, it held overwhelming power.

Astina observed the explosion, a smile forming on her lips.

"If you wanted to defeat me, you should have brought the entire knight order."

CHAPTER 41
HOMECOMING DAY (8)

When Astina's flames vanished, the two figures appeared before us, their bodies charred and scorched.

"Are… Are they dead?" Luna asked, her face filled with shock.

Astina responded with a smirk, "They'll probably be fine. They've fortified their bodies."

Upon closer examination, it became clear that they were merely unconscious, still breathing.

Deciding that the two were no longer capable of combat, I turned to Astina.

"I have somewhere to go, so I'll be leaving first."

"Somewhere to go?"

Luna frowned at me.

"I have something to confirm."

"Something to confirm?"

BOOM!!

Astina seemed puzzled, but the distant explosion provided the explanation on my behalf.

"What was that?"

Could it be Serina?

A feeling of unease surged within me.

"I'll go and check it out."

BOOOM!

Another explosion reverberated.

Thud…

Then came the sound of rocks tumbling onto the roof of the training ground.

Rocks falling on the roof.

Which meant…

Astina also realized this and opened her mouth.

"No need to go."

CRASH!!!!!!!!!!

Someone crashed through the roof of the training ground where we stood and descended.

The figure of a person appeared, riding on the shoulder of Clay, an intermediate earth elemental.

It was Serina.

Following her descent, a green hawk pursued her.

Sylph, the intermediate wind elemental.

The hawk clutched a black bag in its beak.

From its size, it seemed perfectly suited for carrying a sword.

She had successfully stolen Priscilla.

I thought that the two of them might have run into each other before arriving at the training ground.

But it seemed that wasn't the case.

The story had changed due to these two who came to kill Astina.

These two had taken control of the training ground, preventing Evan from reaching Serina.

And with no one to stop Serina from stealing the sword, she ended up with it.

"Haah……”

I sighed.

The silver lining was that she hadn't formed a contract with Priscilla yet.

There was still hope.

"What are you doing?" Astina asked as she approached Serina.

"Last time… I saw you all."

Serina glanced at us as she spoke.

"I don't want to harm you."

"Ser… Serina."

Luna looked surprised, her gaze shifting between us.

I placed a hand on Luna's shoulder and offered her a reassuring smile.

"Luna, it's alright."

I stepped forward and faced Serina.

"Just return Priscilla. You're not ready to use it yet."

“…You know about Priscilla?"

Serina's eyes widened at my words.

"Yes. If you give us the sword now, we can resolve this without any trouble."

I tried to persuade her slowly.

I thought we could solve this through conversation.

"You'll have the chance to meet Priscilla in due time. But if you run away with the sword now, everything will be ruined. Both for you and Priscilla."

"What are you talking about…? Why would I be ruined by taking the sword?"

Serina tilted her head, questioning.

"Because you can't handle Priscilla. So, take it slowly, grow stronger, and make a proper contract. It will be better for both of you."

Astina approached me and whispered, "What do you know?"

I didn't answer her question, simply gazing ahead.

"Serina, if you listen to me now, we can make it as if you never stole the sword or attacked the guards."

We could shift all the blame onto the two unconscious individuals.

Serina stared at me.

I didn't know what she was thinking behind her stoic expression, but the fact that she hadn't attacked us yet was a positive sign.

"Hand over the sword."

I reached out towards Serina.

She hesitated for a moment before responding, "No, I won't make the same mistake again."

Serina reached out towards us.

"I won't… lose my family again."

"Astina! Luna!"

At that moment, Sylph, who stood beside Serina, released a blade of wind, while Clay struck the ground.

"I know."

Astina moved her mana in response to the sudden attacks.

"Psychic Barrier."

A white shield materialized around us.

The shield began repelling the wind blades launched by Sylph.

However, it couldn't fend off every attack.

A large boulder emerged from the ground, shattering the floor beneath us.

"Ugh!"

"Aaargh!"

"Luna!"

Luna stumbled, struggling to maintain her balance.

I hurried over and caught hold of Luna's hand.

Then, I pulled her into my arms.

"Luna, are you alright?"

"Ah, ah, ah! I'm okay… but Astina senior!"

Looking at Astina; she had sustained injuries from Sylph's attack.

She had lost her balance when the ground shifted and couldn't maintain her magic.

I firmly gripped Luna's shoulder and spoke up.

"Luna, go and call for help. Astina senior and I will hold our ground here."

"But…"

I extended my hand towards the wall.

"Finger of the Demon."

Bang!

As I incanted the spell, a black pillar shot forth, breaking through the outer wall of the training ground.

Releasing my mana, the black pillar vanished, leaving an opening in the wall.

"There's no time to hesitate… I'm counting on you."

"……Okay. I'll bring help as soon as possible. Please stay safe."

I smiled at Luna's words and replied.

"Got it."

As soon as Luna began to run, Serina noticed her and Sylph unleashed blades of wind in her direction.

However, Astina expanded the size of her barrier, successfully repelling all the wind blades aimed at Luna.

I turned my attention to Serina.

"Wind Blaster!"

"Clay!"

In response, Clay dragged a large rock from the ground, obstructing Serina's path.

Although the rock managed to deflect most of my magic, some of it broke through.

"Damn!"

The magic shattered the rock, and its fragments flew toward Serina, causing minor injuries.

I unleashed a barrage of spells.

Serina, however, did not passively endure the onslaught; she used her elementals to fend off the attack.

We fought, the two of us dividing our roles into offense and defense.

Yet, Serina, single-handedly managing both roles, held her ground without faltering.

Under normal circumstances, we should have been gaining the upper hand.

Looking at Astina's expression, I thought I understand why.

"Can you keep using telekinetic magic?"

“…Honestly, it's difficult. I can sustain the telekinetic magic, but it's hard to use other spells at the same time."

The lingering effects of Harpel's scroll were still affecting her.

Even so, we couldn't afford to retreat.

If we were to escape, it would give Serina a chance to run away.

"Then, let's just hold on until help arrives."

“……Understood. Haaah… once this fight is over, I need to learn other intermediate magic."

Her strength lay in her adept utilization of telekinetic magic, renowned for its versatility.

However, she couldn't use other intermediate-level spells effectively enough for practical use.

Her outstanding proficiency with telekinetic magic had led her to be complacent.

While she excelled in basic magic as well, such spells had limitations.

It was impossible to counter all of Serina's attacks with just basic magic.

As our standoff continued, Serina furrowed her brow.

If help joined in, it would result in her loss.

Her gaze then fixated on Priscilla.

After contemplating for a moment, Serina seemed to reach a decision.

"Ah…"

Sylph passed the sword over to Serina.

A sword radiating a blue glow.

It was an exact match to the Priscilla I had seen in the game.

"Astina senior! We must stop her!"

"What?"

Serina is planning to form a contract right here.

She's using it to bring an end to this stalemate.

"Finger of the Demon!!"

"Ack!"

A black pillar jutted up from Serina's position.

Seizing the opportunity, I dashed forward.

"Astina senior! Pull that sword towards me!"

"Sylph!!"

As I shouted, Sylph redirected its focus toward me.

"Rudy!!"

A multitude of wind blades hurtled towards me.

"Wind Blaster!"

As I ran, I used magic to deflect as many attacks as possible, but it wasn't enough to intercept them all.

The blades inflicted cuts on my arms and body, but I didn't stop running and continued towards Serina.

"Clay!"

Serina tried to impede my progress with Clay, but Astina was not just standing by and watching.

"Gravity!"

Astina employed gravity to suppress Clay's movements.

"Grasp."

Without delay, Astina cast another spell.

In an instant, Priscilla was wrenched from Serina's grasp.

The sword soared towards me, and I reached out to claim it.

"I've got it……”

As the sword made contact with my hand, a sensation coursed not through my hand, but my abdomen.

"Ah……”

A wind-formed spear had impaled my stomach.

In the brief moment I had stopped moving, Sylph had launched a powerful attack.

"Cough……”

I felt intense pain, but I kept my focus and clung to the sword.

I crumpled to the ground, sword still in hand.

"Rudy Astria!!!"

Astina cried out, her expression one of astonishment.

And she began to run towards me.

"Sylph, Clay."

Serina took advantage of Astina's confusion and issued commands to her two elementals.

Astina also tried to respond by using magic.

"Psychic Barrier……”

Zap!

"Ah……?"

Astina abruptly stopped in her tracks.

"The magic didn't activate……?"

Could it be……

Was it Ian's magic?

Astina looked at the incoming attack, her expression filled with surprise.

Unable to use any magic.

"At a time like this……”

I tried to use magic, but it was too late.

By the time I get up, the attack would've already landed.

It was my mistake.

I failed to understand Ian's magic.

I placed too much trust in Evan.

I created too many variables and didn't account for them.

Even after altering the storyline, I grew complacent.

It was all my fault.

"Ah……”

The attacks flying toward Astina seemed to be moving in slow motion.

As if time was moving slowly.

I had heard that during a crisis, time could appear this way.

It's even more traumatic as a result.

The sight of someone getting hurt because of my mistake.

It was a desperate situation.

But, I felt something strange.

The elementals' attacks were slowing down, and stopping near Astina.

I stared blankly, unable to understand what was happening.

"Hey, kiddo?"

Then, I heard a somewhat androgynous voice.

"Hey, kiddo~~."

The voice carried a playful tone.

I tried to turn my head to find the owner of the voice, but I couldn't move.

I was Immobilized, I couldn't make the slightest movement.

And then the voice echoed again.

"Kiddo, don't you want to save that lady?"

Yet, I couldn't respond.

My mouth refused move.

"You don't have to voice it. Say it in your head."

Immediately I thought the words.

I want to save her.

Please, I want to save her.

"Is that so? Then let's make a contract."

Ah……

When I heard those words, I knew who the owner of the voice was.

The sword I held.

"If you make a contract with me, I'll save that lady."

It was Priscilla.

CHAPTER 42
HOMECOMING DAY (9)

Priscilla.

An elemental with the power to freeze an entire city.

A force that was impossible to ignore.

The full extent of her power hadn't been revealed.

Each of her contractors had failed to fully harness Priscilla's power.

But I'd seen her full might before.

In the later parts of the story, Serina successfully taps into all of Priscilla's power—an overwhelming sight of her standing alone against thousands of soldiers and dozens of wizards.

It was overwhelming.

"So, will you enter a contract?" Priscilla's voice echoed in my mind.

Given her immense power, it was tempting.

But remembering the havoc she had wreaked in the past, her offer seemed more like the devil's whisper.

"Hmm… What's there to consider? Why are you so hesitant?"

Would you jump at the chance if you were me?

I could lose my mind if I messed up.

Even if I could save Astina from Serina's attack, losing control would endanger not just Astina, but everyone else too.

"Come on, agree to the contract. When else will you get such a chance?"

But, if I refuse the contract, I lose the chance to protect Astina.

She'd have to bear the full brunt of the attack herself.

Though she wouldn't lose her life from just it, she'd be incapacitated for the rest of the fight.

I was already severely injured.

My only choice was clear.

'Can I control you?' I asked Priscilla.

"Control? What do you mean? Even with a contract, you're the one using the power, not me."

'Will my sanity hold on if we form a contract?'

At that, Priscilla burst into laughter.

"Control? Huhu… Do you see me as a ticking bomb? I don't know where you got that idea, but I'm not some sort of pervert."

I knew otherwise from many scenes.

However, I didn't have all the details.

I only knew that neither Serina nor her mother could control Priscilla.

"Do you think I enjoy watching my contractors perish? I'm a kind elemental, you know?"

'I can't believe that an elemental that consumes the mind would say that.'

"Hmm… consumes the mind…"

Upon hearing my words, Priscilla pondered for a moment.

"Sure, you need mental fortitude to wield me, but isn't that a small price for the power you gain?"

'You could drive a human mind insane, and you call that a small price?'

"To master other abilities, you need to invest time and effort, but I grant immense power instantly. Isn't that a risk worth taking?"

"And…" Priscilla continued, a note of annoyance in her voice.

"I only provide power. The contractors are the ones who lose control. I never approach those who can't handle me. They're the ones who get drunk on power and destroy themselves."

Realization dawned as I listened.

'So, what if someone unable to handle you wishes to form a contract?'

"Are you talking about Serina?"

I didn't respond, so Priscilla continued in a regretful tone.

"If she genuinely wishes to challenge herself, I will give her the opportunity. But not now."

With that, a hidden part of the story seemed to reveal itself.

Serina must have tried to form a contract with Priscilla, despite not being able to handle her.

Serina's mother had done the same.

And the emotion embedded when she spoke of Serina just now.

Priscilla doesn't want to form a contract with Serina at this time.

That's why she was now trying to form a contract with me.

'So, you're saying the contract can be canceled later?'

"If Serina grows to that extent, I'll break it."

This was rather good news for me.

"Now, has the misunderstanding about me cleared up a bit, kiddo?"

I made up my mind.

'Yes.'

And I told Priscilla my decision.

'Let's form a contract.'

* * *

Astina raised her arms, preparing to absorb the impact of the incoming attack.

She closed her eyes tightly, knowing that her arms alone wouldn't be enough to withstand it.

"Uh…"

Bang!

A loud crash rang out in front of her.

It was the sound of a collision.

She opened her eyes and looked ahead.

A blue-furred wolf stood in front of her.

"What…"

She turned to Rudy and saw him using the sword to prop himself up.

"Pri… Priscilla?"

[It's been a while, Serina.]

Priscilla greeted her.

"How…”

[I formed a contract with that guy.]

Priscilla pointed at Rudy, who was barely managing to stand.

"Why…? Why him…”

[I simply formed a contract with someone capable.]

"But… me? You refused to form a contract with me earlier…”

[Serina, you're not ready to handle me yet.]

Priscilla asserted.

"But… without a contract, Priscilla…”

Serina's voice trembled.

[Aren't all your worries resolved at this point?]

"Huh…?"

[I no longer need to be confined to that sword. If the kid allows it, I can meet you whenever.]

"But still…”

[Serina, now is not the time.]

Priscilla calmly walked over to her and placed her right front paw on Serina's head.

Priscilla's touch was soft, as if she were patting it.

[Grow more and return.]

With those words, Priscilla vanished, dissipating like smoke.

Serina dropped her gaze and collapsed on the spot.

Rudy, too, began to lose his balance.

"Rudy!"

Astina raced towards Rudy, catching him just as he was about to fall.

"Uh…"

Rudy, falling into unconsciousness, let out a low moan.

Blood was steadily seeping from his abdomen.

"Rudy Astria!"

Astina frantically covered Rudy's wound with her hand, trying her best to staunch the bleeding.

But if it continued like this, she couldn't even imagine what might happen to him.

Astina was at a loss for what to do next.

"Heal!"

She channeled her mana and attempted to cast a healing spell.

But, there was no change in Rudy's wound.

"We need to get him medical attention fast…"

In a state of panic, Astina attempted to lift Rudy.

They couldn't remain here…

Then, someone gripped Astina's arm.

"Huh?"

"Lay him flat on the ground."

Turning to the voice, Astina found Professor Cromwell standing there.

"Pro… Professor."

And following him were more professors and guards.

The guards detained the fallen Harpel and Eric, while a few professors surrounded Serina, who was recalling her elementals.

"Don't worry, help has arrived," Professor Cromwell reassured Astina as he gently took Rudy from her arms.

* * *

Due to the commotion near the Elementalist Department building, most events in the main building were canceled, plunging the entire place into chaos.

Amidst all this, Saintess Haruna was slowly preparing to depart.

She had met everyone she had planned to, and with such a disturbance, there was nothing else to do.

Haruna moved away from the hubbub and towards the carriage sent by the church.

"Hello?"

At the sound of the voice, Haruna turned around.

There stood the First Princess, Rie.

"Ah, Princess Rie. Hello."

Haruna greeted Rie with a warm smile.

"The situation seems quite serious right now, shouldn't you check on things?"

"Hmm… I should, but it looks like things have somewhat settled. More importantly…"

Rie began with a sly smile.

"Why do you keep your eyes covered?"

Rie observed Haruna's reaction as she posed the question.

When Haruna showed no immediate response, she asked again.

"You don't seem to make much effort to hide it?"

Haruna held Rie's gaze.

Rie continued.

"Indeed, you go around with your eyes veiled, leading to many rumors that you're blind. However, upon seeing you now, you hardly seem visually impaired."

Rie stroked her chin as she recounted the rumors she'd heard.

"In the Church and other places, there's little information about you. Your origins, your day-to-day life…"

"Do you mean to suggest that you've been prying into the Saintess' life? That doesn't sound like a good rumor to go around, does it?"

Haruna retorted, a smirk playing on her lips.

"Well, spreading rumors won't do much."

Rie countered, her gaze piercing Haruna sharply.

"What could a Saintess, who abstains from worship and wields no influence within the Church, possibly do to me?"

"You claim to have found little, yet you seem to know quite a bit."

"Regardless, I am the heir to this Empire."

While Rie maintained an aggressive stance, Haruna's remained unruffled, and she responded calmly.

"I'm neither blind nor the Saintess. I'm merely a naïve girl with the ability to glimpse

the future."

"What?"

She furrowed her brow at Haruna's sudden revelation.

Haruna spoke too easily.

It was suspicious.

Nonchalantly, Haruna brushed off Rie's wary gaze.

"If you've already delved so deep into my past, you'd have eventually discovered this. What could an ordinary person like me possibly do against a princess?"

Haruna untied the cloth obscuring her eyes and met Rie's stare directly.

"I cover my eyes because I foresee my future blindness."

"Your future?"

"I'm destined to lose my sight. I don't know when or how it will happen… I'm simply undergoing an early adjustment period."

Haruna stated, her smile teasing.

"As for being the Saintess… where to begin…"

Haruna mused, her hand supporting her chin.

Suddenly, as if a realization struck her, she clapped her hands together.

"Oh! Perhaps it's best to withhold that information."

"…What?"

Rie stared at Haruna, bewildered.

"It seems to be the smartest choice. It's better if you remain in the dark."

With that, Haruna made her way toward the carriage.

"Wait! Saintess?"

"You'll discover the truth in due time. Don't fret. As one who can glimpse the future, I can assure you. All you need to know is that I'm not the Saintess."

As Haruna climbed into the carriage, she left Rie with a final remark.

"Gaining knowledge too quickly… can do more bad than good."

CHAPTER 43
FINAL EXAM (1)

My eyes fluttered open.

I was stuck in the heart of a storm.

Surrounding me were familiar faces like Luna, Rie, and Astina.

I held their hands tightly, pushing through.

Even as the storm tore at me, leaving scratches and bruises, I didn't back down.

A streak of light appeared at the end of the storm.

I strained to reach for it.

But then, I was faced with a choice.

To touch the light, I had to release the hands I was holding.

But, if I didn't grab the light, I felt I would lose it forever.

Suddenly, a cold sensation touched my face.

Cold?

"Uh… huh?"

The chilly touch roused me, causing me to open my eyes.

Was it all just a dream?

"Oh! Rudy!"

As my eyes opened, I saw Luna wiping my face with a damp cloth.

"You're awake!"

Her face was bright as she greeted me.

"Luna, where am I…?"

I looked around.

A fruit basket was perched on a shelf.

I was lying on a white bed, dressed in a patient's gown.

And Luna was sitting beside me.

It appeared to be a hospital room.

"Have I been out for days?"

"You were out for a day. Don't worry."

Luna's calm smile was reassuring.

I was relieved that only a day had passed.

The final exams were nearing, and being out for longer would've caused problems.

"Uh……”

I tried to sit up, only to be met with a sharp pain in my abdomen.

"Rest, Rudy. You're not completely healed. The doctor recommended natural healing over magic, so you might still have some injuries."

The idea of healing everything with magic seemed more appealing given the pain I was in.

With my current state, attending classes at the academy seemed impossible.

"Can't we just use magic to heal?"

"No, we can't."

The door swung open as I said this, and Astina walked in with a doctor in a white coat.

"A wizard's natural healing ability is their lifeline. If the body's healing speed slows down, the speed at which your mana regenerates also slows down."

"Can it get any slower? I need to attend class."

Sure, natural healing is important, but classes are my main concern.

Without attending classes, it's hard to keep up with the studies, and getting good grades becomes a challenge.

Since I didn't have any friends to share notes with, self-study was out of the question.

If I had to take the finals in this state, failing was a certainty.

Astina looked at me, a smile playing on her lips.

"Seems like you're well enough to complain."

The doctor standing next to her chuckled at this.

"Better to rest. This isn't the student council president speaking, but a doctor. You should trust it. Let's check your wound, shall we?"

After inspecting my injury, the doctor assured me that I was healing well and should be able to leave within a week. He then exited the room.

Once the doctor left, I turned my attention to Astina.

"What happened?"

I wasn't overly concerned about Astina's brother, but the situation with Serina did concern me.

"Everything has been sorted out."

Astina replied, a broad smile adorning her face.

"Sorted out…?"

"Yes. Serina was expelled and is being transferred to the capital for trial."

“…What?"

"Hmm?"

I was greatly taken aback.

"Everything has been resolved 'nicely'. Serina will 'nicely' face the consequences of her actions."

"Wha……”

I was at a loss for words.

Things weren't sorted out, things were messed up.

More than messed up.

I still needed Serina for numerous things, but expulsion…

Well, if she was still at the academy, we might've been able to reverse the expulsion somehow.

But the fact that she had already been expelled and even taken to the capital left me reeling.

Taking a deep breath, I asked another question to Astina.

"What… what were the charges…?"

"Don't worry! They've covered everything thoroughly. Attempted murder, theft of a treasure-grade artifact, and more."

Attempted murder? Theft of a treasure-grade artifact?

Had the charges been minor, I could've pulled some strings to get her out.

But with such serious allegations, it was out of my hands.

These were charges that could see her incarcerated for several years at least.

"Ah…"

I'm screwed.

* * *

A few days later.

I was lying alone in the hospital room.

It was a weekday, and unlike the weekend when Luna was able to keep me company, she had classes to attend, leaving me on my own.

Still, I wasn't bored.

I discovered I could converse with Priscilla without having to summon her.

I immediately questioned her.

"Serina has been arrested. Aren't you concerned?"

[Why should I worry about her facing the consequences of her actions?]

"But you don't know how she's going to pay for them. And if she ends up in jail, you don't know when you'll see her again."

[It's part of growing up. And if she wants to see me, she'll find a way. I believe Serina has learned a lot from this incident.]

Priscilla's words led to a sigh escaping my lips.

In the game, Serina's growth was always linked to Evan.

She relied more heavily on Evan than the other heroines.

She grew mentally through all the incidents they go through together.

But with her expulsion from the academy, that will no longer be the case.

The prospect of jail was concerning, but the question remained whether she could achieve mental growth independently.

"What a headache."

I stared blankly at the ceiling, deep in thought.

The issue was that there was a significant change in the story.

All incidents involving Serina could be a problem now because of her sudden absence.

However, those related to Priscilla were fine.

Those incidents were not important to the main storyline but were more about Serina's personal growth.

The problematic ones were those that were originally resolved by Serina.

With her sudden absence, there was a huge loss of manpower.

It was like being outnumbered.

The abrupt disappearance of a figure as skilled as Serina means more preparation is needed.

"What a headache…"

This incident has taught me much.

I was now thoroughly entangled in the main storyline.

Backing out is no longer an option.

While the main story's structure remained intact, minor incidents had been drastically altered.

All these events were changing due to the ripple effect of my actions.

The Butterfly Effect.

My seemingly insignificant actions were causing major shifts in events, much like the butterfly effect.

This incident was no different.

Serina's disappearance would likely lead to an even greater butterfly effect.

And since I caused this butterfly effect, it was my responsibility to address it.

"When will Evan actually do something…”

My frustration began to bubble up.

The protagonist merely buried himself in studies, not helping whatsoever.

I was changing the story to survive, I suppose it can't be helped…

But he should at least contribute something.

"This… so-called protagonist…”

[What are you grumbling about?]

"It's nothing you need to worry about……”

I said to Priscilla, sighing heavily.

"But it's nearly vacation time…”

Exams weren't yet over, but the holidays were coming up.

Ah, sweet vacation…

In the game, vacation truly was a period of rest.

A time free from incidents, ideal for comfortable training.

If I could just manage the exams well, I too would have a break.

I could train in dark magic… I could learn to handle Priscilla… and other magic too…

It was a 'break', but most importantly it was a period devoid of life-threatening situations.

But I couldn't exactly relax.

"But what's really troubling are the final exams…"

-Knock Knock

"Hey Rudy, I'm coming in."

The person behind the door entered even before I could respond.

"Why bother knocking if you're just going to barge in?"

The uninvited guest was Rie.

"You seem to be doing better than I expected? Luna made it sound like you were on death's door."

"Try getting stabbed in the abdomen. Then you'll understand."

Each time I tried to sit up, a sharp pain coursed through my belly, making it impossible to assume a comfortable position.

At this, Rie chuckled and settled herself in the chair opposite me.

I glared at her as I began,

"Why are you here on a weekday when you were nowhere to be seen over the weekend?"

At that, Rie sported a broad grin.

"Hmm~? Did you miss me because I didn't visit?"

"Yes, I did miss you."

I was slightly annoyed.

Not having many friends, and with Rie failing to show up, had made me feel a little lonely.

At my candid admission, Rie's eyes widened in surprise.

"You missed me even though you have Luna and Astina?"

"What?"

I narrowed my eyes at Rie.

Why were Luna and Astina suddenly part of the conversation?

Before I could pose the question, Rie crossed her arms and smirked.

"In that case, I'll make it a point to visit first next time."

Seeing her delighted expression, I refrained from saying anything more.

While I would have probably felt the same if Luna or Astina had failed to visit, I didn't think it necessary to spoil Rie's mood by mentioning that.

"So, why didn't you visit earlier?"

At that, Rie pulled out papers from her bag and handed it to me.

The papers contained information related to Serina.

"I couldn't just sit idle when unpleasant things were happening at the academy, being a part of the student council and all."

In essence, she had dealt with the matter herself.

The document listed charges against Serina, all meticulously detailed.

Judging from the gravity of these crimes, it seemed highly improbable that Serina

would ever return to the academy.

"Haah… good job."

"That's it?"

Rie retorted, a frown forming on her face.

Her disgruntled appearance made me feel a bit uncomfortable.

She seemed to have exaggerated various crimes as if to take revenge for me, so should I be grateful…?

Looking somewhat irritated, Rie began rummaging through her bag again.

"Here, you'll probably appreciate this more."

Rie produced a few more documents.

"And what are these?"

"Notes from the classes you missed."

A chill ran down my spine.

Suddenly, Rie appeared to be wreathed in a halo, like a messiah descending from the heavens.

"Ri… Rie you…!"

"Yes, I thought you'd appreciate something like this more. Consider it a get-well gift."

Rie chuckled as she handed me the papers.

Though it was rather unconventional to receive lecture notes as a get-well gift, they were precisely what I needed at the moment.

I had been worrying about how to catch up with the classes after being discharged, so it was a great relief.

"If you stumble upon anything you don't comprehend, don't hesitate to ask. I'll assist if I can."

"Rie…! You truly are the best friend!"

With a thumbs-up, I expressed my gratitude.

CHAPTER 44
FINAL EXAM (2)

The wind danced on a clear day.

If it were a bit cooler, it would've been a nice breeze.

But the day was heating up, so the wind felt warm rather than refreshing.

In this hot weather, many students were training hard in the training hall.

They swung their swords, pausing only to wipe the sweat off their brows.

The indoor training hall buzzed with the intensity of students practicing swordsmanship.

Among these diligent students, one stood out.

A girl with silver hair, swinging a gleaming rapier with speed.

Her movements were unpredictable, with no excessive movements to them.

She seemed to target only the essential points of a person's body.

Her swordsmanship was beyond ordinary student standards.

"Wow… Is that the skill level required to get into the academy?"

"It's as if she's wielding moonlight."

As her silver hair whipped through the air with her movements, she seemed to be dancing in a cascade of moonlight.

Other students stole glances at her, awe-struck by her skill, while practicing their own swordplay.

Of course, most didn't realize that her movements were those of a trained assassin.

They simply saw an exceptional swordswoman.

"Haah……"

The girl, Yeniel, put down her sword and started wiping off sweat, aware of the increasing gazes around her.

'I'm overdoing it.'

She hadn't planned to draw so much attention.

She just wanted to train like any other student, but as her thoughts wandered, her body moved of its own accord.

What had Yeniel so deep in thought was none other than Rudy Astria.

Rudy Astria's standing in the academy was changing.

Not only had he repelled outsiders who plotted and infiltrated the academy on homecoming day, but he also thwarted Serina's attempt to steal a priceless sword.

The academy was buzzing with the news.

If asked who the strongest first-year student was, everyone would point to Serina, who consistently ranked first.

The Elementalist Department students were stronger than others in their year because of their unique abilities.

And so, Serina, undoubtedly the top of the Elementalist Department, was thought to be the strongest.

But Rudy Astria had stopped her.

Given these events, everyone began to reconsider their opinions of him.

A student excelling not just in academics but also combat.

And now, they had to rethink his character, given how he repelled the intruders.

-Actually, isn't Rudy Astria a nice guy?

Upon reflection, he hadn't done anything notably bad.

The bullying incident had been a misunderstanding.

-But… what about the rumors from the family…

The majority of the students started to see Rudy Astria in a more positive light.

While some still felt uneasy due to his past reputation, it was clear that the public opinion of Rudy Astria was improving.

This change sparked Yeniel's curiosity.

When she was trained as an assassin for the rebel faction, she was taught about her enemies and the activities of certain nobles.

When they taught her about the Astria family, Rudy Astria's name came up.

They described him as a careless young master.

A man who would be nothing without the Astria family.

They told her that he was merely a pawn for the Astria family to use and discard.

But the reality in front of her eyes was different.

He was now the talk of the academy.

He was in the spotlight during the midterm camp and again on homecoming day.

Once could be due to luck, but twice was a pattern.

And she heard that he had a hand in the library fire incident as well.

However, besides the homecoming day event, the other incidents didn't draw much attention to Rudy Astria.

All the praise went to others.

The common thread was that all those people were close to Rudy Astria.

Yeniel felt like she was onto something.

Could Rudy Astria be a low-key powerhouse?

A hidden puppet master, who keeps a low profile.

Seeing things that way, it all seemed to make sense.

He gives his own merits to those around him and helps them grow.

Then, he hides in their shadows and pulls the strings.

Hidden from the world.

Yeniel remembered something her master said when she was an assassin.

-Yeniel… The truly powerful do not reveal themselves. Those who manipulate from behind the scenes, they are the real power.

-Eh? What about emperors and dukes? Are they weak?

-… Why are you asking questions?

Back then, she thought her master was just rambling. But now, his words seemed to make sense.

Rudy Astria seemed to be living proof of her master's teachings.

He was influencing the world without making his presence known.

Rie becomes the emperor, and Astina inherits the Persia family.

These two will then become the focal points of the Royal faction.

And Rudy Astria is from the Astria family, which is on the opposite side.

Considering that Ian Astria, who usually didn't show up, attended this homecoming day, it seemed that he and Rudy weren't on bad terms.

So, he might be in a position to influence both the Royal and Noble factions, without holding any title himself.

"A fearsome guy…"

Perhaps his effort to blend into the academy crowd was also part of his plan.

Masking his true nature…

Yeniel's mind wandered back to the midterm camp period.

The image of Rudy, unflinching even in the face of a surprise attack.

As if foreseeing the ambush, he overpowered her with a single move.

The memory sent shivers down her spine.

Who could dare label such a man a fool, or a disposable pawn of the Astria family?

Such rumors wouldn't have spread without deliberate action.

Could the spread of those rumors have been Rudy Astria's doing?

Yeniel shivered, her brows furrowing.

"How far ahead has he planned…!"

But even with these suspicions, she was powerless.

She was bound to Astina.

The magic binding her heart could end her life.

"Should I consider myself fortunate to be under his wing?"

Yeniel was an assassin affiliated with the Rebels, but she had no grand purpose driving her actions.

She simply did what she did because it was the only path available to her.

So, even if Rudy Astria was orchestrating a sinister scheme, she didn't care as long as she remained unaffected.

However, knowing such an individual existed within the same academy…

"I should warn Evan to be careful."

Evan wasn't connected to Rudy Astria, but he was the only person aware of Yeniel's circumstances.

Initially, Serina was also in the loop, but she had been taken to the capital.

So, Evan was the only person Yeniel could confide in.

If, by any chance, Evan made a misstep with Rudy Astria and he vanished without a trace…

Yeniel wiped away her sweat and cleaned her sword, lost in her thoughts.

Then, she left to study for the final exam with Evan.

* * *

"Huh? Rie already brought them?"

Luna, unloading a stack of notes she had gathered from friends, was taken aback by the news that Rie had already delivered some yesterday.

She had gathered these notes by asking her friends for their help.

However, hearing that he had already received the same set of notes, dampened her spirits.

"Oh, looking at them closer, these notes are different. Thank you so much, Luna."

"No, no! It's only natural for me to help as a friend."

After exchanging a few words with Rudy, Luna left the room.

"So he already had them…”

Luna muttered to herself, her expression crestfallen.

Luna felt a great deal of guilt towards Rudy.

While her recent research had been progressing well, and she had been sharing her results with Rudy, it felt like it wasn't enough.

The opportunity to attend the academy was thanks to Rudy, and the fact that she couldn't help him when he got injured fighting Serina last time still gnawed at her.

'If only I were stronger, there wouldn't have been a need to involve others… '

Luna felt a strong desire to do something more for Rudy.

However, she couldn't come up with any ideas.

"Hmm…”

Just as she was about to head to the library with a dejected expression.

"Ah, young lady. You're a friend of Rudy's, aren't you?"

The nurse managing the ward addressed Luna.

The nurse recognized Luna, as she was often at Rudy's bedside when he was unconscious.

With a somber expression, Luna responded to the nurse.

"Can I truly call myself a friend of Rudy…”

“……What?"

Caught off guard by her own words, Luna hastily waved her hands.

"No… No! Is there something you need?"

"Oh, could you give this to Rudy? It's his hospital bill, and the academy has requested

immediate payment."

"Ah, thank you."

"No, I should be the one thanking you."

The nurse handed Luna the bill and walked away.

As Luna examined the bill, she noticed Rudy's student details.

The details were not extensive, just the basic information.

"Huh…?"

Among these details, one piqued her interest.

Rudy's birth date was noted there.

His birthday was the same day as the final exam.

"Birth… day?"

Luna started counting the days remaining until the final exam.

"So there are 10 days left…!"

Luna clenched her fist.

Her motivation sparked anew.

"A birthday gift!"

The day the final exams conclude.

That's when she would present him with a gift.

She believed that a post-exam gift would be genuinely appreciated by Rudy.

"But… what should I give him?"

In truth, there wasn't much she could offer as a gift.

Anything she bought wouldn't hold much value for Rudy.

With all her money going into research fees, she had none left for herself.

Rudy was also wealthy enough to support her financially.

Although the sentiment behind a gift outweighs its price tag, a cheap gift might be disappointing.

So, she needed something more unique.

And only one option came to mind.

"Should I make it myself…?"

If it's a handmade gift… it would hold a value that money can't buy…

"But… would it be too much?"

Various scenarios played out in Luna's mind.

From Rudy joyfully accepting the gift to him discarding the awkwardly crafted item…

While Rudy probably wouldn't outright discard the item, she was still worried.

After an internal struggle, Luna reached a decision.

"I'll make him a gift!"

She believed it would be fine if it was a gift filled with her gratitude.

CHAPTER 45
FINAL EXAM (3)

A few days later.

Finally, I was well enough to leave the hospital.

Originally, the doctor suggested a few more days of rest.

But I begged for an early discharge, tired of being cooped up in the hospital room.

Then it was time for magic practice class.

"Oh, Rudy Astria. Are you sure you should be out of the hospital so soon?"

Professor Cromwell looked at me, concern etching his features.

Rie mirrored him, her expression just as worried.

"I couldn't bear to stay cooped up in there any longer."

The truth was, it wasn't that bad.

In fact, I'd slept a lot and enjoyed a well-deserved break.

Yes, I did study some, but without my regular training and the books I needed, it wasn't as productive.

I thought about asking Rie and Luna to bring me books, but they had already been kind enough to visit.

I didn't want to trouble them further.

In the end, I had just rested.

A touch of anxiety lingered, but my body welcomed the rare break.

Professor Cromwell gave a soft chuckle.

"You're a bit like Robert, surprisingly."

"Professor Robert? How?" I asked, furrowing my brows.

I couldn't understand the comparison.

"You're similar in that aspect too. Let's start the class."

With that, Cromwell kicked off the lesson.

Following the class wasn't too hard.

Rie had given me the notes from the classes I missed and explained them well, helping me catch up fast.

And, with only two students in the class, Professor Cromwell could easily answer any questions I had.

"Let's wrap up for today."

"Thank you for your hard work."

Rie and I expressed our gratitude to Professor Cromwell and began to gather our books.

"Hey, Rudy."

"Yeah?"

She turned to me.

"Do you know what Luna has been up to lately?"

"Luna?"

I was about to say that she was obviously preparing for the final exams when I remembered something Luna had said.

She said something unexpected when I suggested we go to the library together today.

-Sorry! I have something else to do……

Although I've declined her offers before, Luna turning me down was a surprise.

Even when I asked Riku and Ena, I didn't get a clear answer.

All they told me was she was busy with something.

I was slightly puzzled by the sly grin on their faces, but I shrugged it off.

"She mentioned she was occupied with something else."

Upon hearing this, Rie thought for a moment before gathering her book.

"I see. I better head out, then."

With that, Rie exited the classroom, a knowing look on her face.

* * *

"Rie, I hate to ask, but could you do me a favor?"

Days earlier, Luna had approached Rie with a request.

"A favor? What kind?"

"Well… could you help me find a mana stone? A friend from the alchemy department said they're tricky to find……"

"A mana stone? What do you need it for?"

Rie tilted his head, puzzled.

"I'm trying to make a magic tool… Is it too much?"

Luna asked hesitantly.

'A magical tool…? But finals are around the corner.'

Rie thought.

Acquiring a mana stone wasn't tough in itself.

However, Luna's sudden mention of crafting a magic tool was suspicious.

There was nothing about magic tools in the finals, right?

She knew Luna wasn't overly worried about her grades, but she wasn't one to mess around before an exam either.

She was a very dedicated friend.

It meant there was something else.

Rie wondered if Rudy had something to do with it.

But on second thought, that didn't seem likely either.

If Rudy needed it, he would've approached her directly, not Luna.

"Alright, I'll get it to you tomorrow."

"Really? Thank you, Rie!"

Luna's face lit up with a bright smile.

Rie felt there was more to it.

She subtly asked Rudy, but he seemed just as clueless.

Walking down the corridor, Rie mulled it over.

"Luna's crafting a magical tool…"

Luna wasn't particularly close to many.

Her classmates liked her, but she was only close to a few.

And she wasn't close to the professors either.

As far as Rie knew, no one around Luna would ask her to craft a magical tool.

"So, she's doing it on her own…"

Why would she choose to make a magic tool during finals?

There must be a reason.

That day, Rie tasked Locke with finding out why.

"Find out why Luna is making a magic tool."

"…Luna Railer?"

Locke stared at Rie.

"Yes, Luna Railer. Is there another Luna here?"

Rie grumbled, her brows furrowed.

It was out of concern.

When Rie heard Rudy had been injured, her heart dropped.

She realized how upsetting it was to learn someone she cared about had been hurt.

Such an emotion was new to her.

At the royal palace, she had no close friends.

Just like Rudy, Luna might be in trouble, right?

So, she thought it necessary to be prepared.

The following day.

"Luna appears to be planning a birthday present for Rudy Astria."

"…What?"

Rie's eyes widened at Locke's words.

"Rudy… his birthday is coming up?"

"Yes, the day of the final exam coincides with Rudy Astria's birthday. She also bought a gift box."

Rie abruptly rose from her chair.

"Locke."

"Yes."

"From now on, your task is to determine the most suitable birthday gifts for a friend."

Locke paused before responding.

“…For a friend?"

Rie shot Locke a stern look.

Her face started to flush, and she held her lips tightly together.

After a moment, she spoke, her voice barely above a whisper.

"That… Yes, we are… we're friends, so what…”

"Understood."

With a nod, Locke left the room.

* * *

"Professor, how have you been?"

I paid Professor Robert a visit after a while.

"Ah, you've returned to the land of the living."

He greeted me with a wave, chewing on a piece of bread in his other hand.

"How does it feel to have your gut stabbed? Your experience with dark magic must've made it easier, right?"

"Does dark magic backlash really compare to a stab to the stomach…? Also, why didn't you come to see me even once?"

"Why would I visit you? It's not like your injury was my fault."

"But, I'm your dear student, aren't I?"

"Dear student, huh… You're far from being dear or a student, you rascal."

I couldn't help but chuckle at Professor Robert's blunt retort.

Most people at the academy avoided such language to preserve their dignity, so hearing such cursing was a breath of fresh air.

"Now, why are you here? Aren't you supposed to be studying?"

"I just came to check in. Thought I'd share how demanding training has been."

"Alright, ease off the training for a bit and avoid using dark magic. If you're reckless, your wound could reopen. And here, take this."

Professor Robert tossed a book my way.

It was Luna's spellbook.

"I've extracted almost everything of importance."

I had entrusted Luna's spellbook to Professor Robert for a while.

Since I needed to return the grimoire to Luna, I planned on making a copy of its contents.

Though I was concerned about handing the book over to Professor Robert, I gave him the benefit of the doubt.

I trusted a professor at the academy wouldn't do such a thing.

Robert paused, pondering, before he began to speak.

"The book's owner is Luna Railer, correct?"

"Yes, that's correct."

"Make sure you never reveal that book to anyone else."

"What?"

I wore a puzzled expression.

"I won't restrict you from using it, but never hand it over to anyone else. This book isn't created in a conventional way."

"Isn't it expected, given its unique nature?"

If it were possible to mass-produce infinite-use scrolls in a conventional way, they would've already flooded the market.

Professor Robert sighed.

"That's not what I'm saying. If Levian created such an exceptional book and then vanished, there has to be a reason."

His words reminded me of a conversation I had with Rie and Astina previously.

The cause of Levian's disappearance.

Actually, Rie told me she would find the truth, but she hasn't given any updates.

Rie usually has a knack for speedy investigations, but even after months, there's been no information on Levian.

Someone is deliberately concealing facts, making it difficult for even Rie to discover them.

Professor Robert carried on.

"I've been studying that grimoire, and it contains several formulas and ingredients I've never seen before."

"Unknown ingredients……."

"Steer clear of trouble if you can. You've been in a lot of strange events recently; this will only cause more trouble."

I chuckled lightly.

His concern for me was unmistakable.

"Why didn't you come to visit if you're so concerned?"

"Haa… wouldn't a squabble over who gets to play nurse cause you more distress?"

"……Huh?"

I questioned Professor Robert's sudden odd remark.

"There's such a thing."

Are people finding it trendy to randomly say things nowadays?

Rie also did the same.

Given I'm not one to pry into matters that others clearly aren't willing to share, I simply nodded and returned to my studies.

CHAPTER 46
FINAL EXAM (4)

"I'm leaving."

Locke had finished his business at the student council office and now needed to prepare for upcoming exams.

He was no exemplary student but he did what was necessary.

"Locke, wait."

Astina called out to Locke.

He pivoted to face her, brow arched in question.

"What's up?"

Astina seemed to hesitate for a moment, her gaze fixed on him.

Then, as if she had made up her mind, she opened her mouth.

"Um… can I ask you something?"

"Go ahead."

"What's a guy's reaction when an upperclassman asks him out for a meal?"

"On what day? What kind of meal?"

A sense of déjà vu washed over Locke.

He had seen this scene play out before - with Rie.

Whenever she asked such questions, the typically decisive Rie would transform into a timid girl.

It was similar with Astina now, though she seemed to manage better than Rie.

"Suppose it's on a birthday… at a restaurant. No specific reason, just thought of treating him on his birthday."

Locke's suspicions were confirmed.

His detective work, under Rie's orders, had pointed to one conclusion: the only upcoming birthday was Rudy Astria's.

The situation was complicated, however.

Recently, Rie had been trying to figure out the perfect gift for Rudy Astria.

The issue was the timing of the gift - was it during a birthday dinner or just a casual handover in the evening?

If Rie intended to also have dinner with Rudy, things could become complicated.

After some thought, Locke came up with a reply.

"That sounds fine."

He decided to let Rudy Astria make the choice.

Locke didn't want to meddle in someone else's romantic affairs.

Besides, he was hardly qualified to give advice in such matters.

He figured it was best they resolved their issues on their own.

* * *

The day of the final exams arrived.

Final exams didn't bring the same stress as midterms, but I couldn't shake a sense of unease.

Before the hospitalization, I'd spent much of my study time practicing dark magic.

I couldn't avoid feeling a bit anxious, knowing I hadn't prepared as thoroughly as before.

However, with the answer sheets I received from Astina and a post-hospital cramming session, I was hopeful about earning a decent grade.

"Evan must have been studying hard, right?"

While I'd been struggling, he'd been focused on his studies.

It would be a real injustice if he wasn't the top student after that.

Evan was in a far better study environment than in the game.

I did all the hard work and gave the rewards, like Andrei's sword, to him.

The nobles hadn't troubled him, and he could focus purely on his studies.

The only difference from the game was he didn't resent me since I hadn't done anything wrong.

I don't think the protagonist would dramatically change just because there was no one to hate.

Evan was not a character fueled by hatred, and it didn't align with his personality.

"Still, I should check on him later."

This semester had been busy, and I hadn't paid much attention to Evan.

He was doing well independently, but as time passed, I needed to involve myself a bit more.

Being a fair rival would help stimulate his growth.

"Haah… let's stop thinking about other things and start focusing on the final exam…"

I shook my head and whispered to myself.

I quickly glanced over my notes, recollecting what I had committed to memory.

"Rudy Astria."

It was Astina's voice. I looked around.

This was definitely the location for the first-year exams.

The second-year exam hall was some distance away.

"Senior Astina, shouldn't you be heading to your exam?"

"Ah, I wanted to talk to you about something."

"To me?"

Astina hesitated for a moment, then finally spoke.

"How about dinner together tonight?"

Dinner?

"There's a restaurant I've been wanting to try. Maybe we could talk over dinner…"

"Sure, I don't mind."

With exams ending today, I didn't see a problem.

"Great! Let's meet at the dormitory around 5 in the afternoon."

"Got it."

I nodded and headed towards the examination hall.

I entered the room where the exam would be held and took my seat.

I hadn't been studying much lately, but I'd put in significant time before that.

My routine had been relentless — training, studying, managing the story without a break.

There's no way my efforts would betray me.

I'm anxious, but I know I'll be fine once I have the test questions in front of me.

Even during the last exam, I was extremely anxious until the test paper was in front of me.

Despite that, I managed to solve all the problems smoothly.

Success breeds a unique kind of confidence, an assurance that you won't fail.

A smirk playing on my lips, I muttered to myself, "I'll prove it through the results."

* * *

"Ughh……”

The exam hit me harder than expected.

It didn't just break me; it trampled me.

The malicious professors had outdone themselves.

"What, what? Isn't this extreme?"

The exam had surpassed the difficulty level of the midterms and exceeded any I had ever taken.

What grudges did these professors hold against us to set such brutal exam questions?

Still, the struggling students around me offered some relief.

But I couldn't be sure if the top students felt the same.

The top tier is, quite literally, a different world.

As soon as the exam was over, I rushed to find Luna.

Luna was a prodigy who'd placed fifth in the last exam.

Her reaction would be a good indicator of how the top students found the exam.

"Luna……!"

I flung open the door to Luna's exam room and rushed in.

I knew instantly how difficult it was.

"Luna, it's okay… you'll do better next time."

"Luna… I know the exam was tough. But it's okay."

Ena and Riku were near Luna, trying to comfort her.

The usually animated Luna was in her seat, her face blank.

Her vibrancy was gone, her color faded to gray.

She was pale, white as a sheet.

Even Luna wasn't immune to the professors' tyranny……

Seeing Luna's distraught state left me at a loss for words.

I didn't need to ask about her exam.

As I was about to close the classroom door, a familiar voice rang out.

"I must be insane…… I should've studied more……"

I turned to find Rie.

Rie was pacing the hallway, murmuring to herself with a wild look in her eyes.

"Rie."

She jerked as I called her name.

"……"

Rie stared at me. Then…

"You! This is all your fault!"

She seized my collar, shaking me vehemently.

"Hey! What! Why me!"

Rie was shaking me around, her grip tight on my collar.

Rie wasn't particularly strong, so it didn't hurt, but it was a bizarre experience being shaken so vigorously.

Her loud exclamations began drawing attention.

I hastily tapped Rie's shoulder.

"Hey, people are watching."

"Aaaaah!"

She ignored my words, continuing her howling.

"Huh? Rudy? Rie?"

Luna noticed us as Rie continued to cause a commotion.

"Lu… Luna, help--."

"Aaaaahhh!!!"

Rie wouldn't stop shaking me.

"Why is she doing this…?"

"I-I have no id-id-idea."

I didn't intend to stutter, but due to the constant shaking, my words came out jumbled.

Watching us, Luna let out an awkward chuckle.

Then, with caution, she spoke.

"Ah, Rudy… Are you free tonight?"

"…!"

Rie abruptly stopped shaking me at Luna's words.

"Tonight?"

"Yes! How about dinner together?"

Rie swiftly raised her head, locking eyes with Luna.

Feeling a tension crackle between them, I grew even more perplexed.

"What's happening…?"

Bewildered, my gaze darted between them.

CHAPTER 47
FINAL EXAM (5)

"How did it end up like this?"

Astina, frowning, posed this question to me.

"Wouldn't it be nicer if we all ate together?"

I knew well that it wasn't the plan.

But still, wouldn't it be strange if we left out the others?

The exams were over, the semester was done.

It was a time to unwind over a meal.

Rie, cutting her steak with a stoic face, took a bite and mumbled.

"This steak isn't all that great."

Upon hearing this, Luna, mouth full of steak, tilted her head.

"It's tasty… um…?"

Her words were muffled due to her full mouth, but I grasped the gist of it.

Rie and Astina appeared slightly dissatisfied, chewing on their steaks.

Luna, on the other hand, was thoroughly enjoying her meal.

As was I.

This wasn't the high-end meal I had during midterms.

However, it was still a quality meal.

Clatter, clatter.

Luna was a bit clumsy with her knife, making clattering sounds as she cut her steak.

Watching Luna, I noticed her mouth smeared with oil.

Watching her eat, with smears of oil around her mouth, reminded me of a child.

Oddly, it wasn't an unpleasant sight.

Doesn't it warm your heart to see a young child eating heartily?

"Luna, here."

I picked up the napkin next to me and offered it to Luna.

"Hmm?"

Luna looked puzzled, unsure of what it was for.

"Here."

I leaned towards Luna and wiped the oil off her mouth with the napkin.

Luna's eyes widened, and she grabbed the napkin,

"I-I'll do it!"

"Sure."

She seemed embarrassed at having gotten oil on her face while eating.

She quickly wiped her mouth, her face blushing.

Clatter, clatter, clatter, clatter.

Beside me, Rie began to cut her steak as if she meant to cut through the plate itself.

She gave me a piercing look, as if she had a bone to pick with me.

"And what's your deal?"

"It's none of your business. Brat."

Wasn't she the one who grabbed my collar and shook me earlier…

I feel wronged.

What did I do to deserve this?

Our meal was slowly winding down.

We had finished the main course, and now coffee and dessert were being served.

Luna, having finished her dessert, stood up.

"Oh, that reminds me, Rudy, I have a present for you."

“…A present?"

Luna then took out a small box from her pocket, presenting it to me with a bright smile.

" …?"

Baffled, I took the gift.

Rie too rose from her seat and produced a paper box from somewhere.

"Here… take this."

"What's this for?"

"We-well, it's a gift."

Rie handed me the gift, not expressing another word. She seemed shy.

I stared at Rie, puzzled.

Why was she giving me a gift?

What's special about today?

Astina, observing my confused expression, chimed in.

"Happy birthday, Rudy Astria."

"…?"

"Happy birthday, Rudy!"

"…????"

Rie gave me a strange look.

"You didn't know today was your birthday, huh."

With that, everything fell into place.

Today is my birthday.

I was taken aback.

A typical noble wouldn't be ignorant of their birthday.

Nobles would usually throw grand parties on their birthdays.

These celebrations were also networking opportunities with nobles from neighboring territories.

There's no way I could forget a day marked annually by a grand party.

Organizing a grand party takes months of preparation.

It's not a date one easily forgets.

If you prepare late, it's a subpar party.

Now, how do I explain my forgetfulness without being suspicious?

I glanced around cautiously.

To my surprise, everyone seemed unfazed.

"Well, that's so typical of you." Rie chided me.

I frowned. Sure, I was relieved they weren't suspicious, but their knowing looks made me feel annoyed.

"What did you even do back at home?"

Rie's gaze was pitiful as she asked.

"Haha……”

Honestly, I'm curious too.

How did I live in the mansion?

All I could do was laugh awkwardly.

"Rudy, open the gift."

Upon Luna's prompt, I placed the gift on the table.

I started by unwrapping Luna's gift.

Inside was a ring with a black stone set in it.

"I made this ring myself! Hoho!"

Luna beamed, puffing out her chest in pride as she explained about the ring.

"I crafted a protective spell using Wind Ball magic!"

"You applied Wind Ball magic?"

"Yes! I'll show you the magic circle later!"

"Thank you, Luna."

"Hehe……”

She giggled, scratching her head.

Next, I unwrapped Rie's gift.

Inside was a bottle of men's cologne.

"Hmm… It's a fine cologne. Make good use of it."

"Uh… Thank you."

Though the wrapping was a bit peculiar.

It was filled with heart patterns.

I wondered if heart-patterned wrapping was a typical choice for a birthday gift.

When I glanced around, both Astina and Luna looked shocked.

“…What? Why?"

Rie looked puzzled at their reactions.

"Rie… Giving cologne as a gift…”

Luna cautiously began, and Astina continued.

"Gifting cologne to a man is something typically reserved for lovers, especially a high-end fragrance like this."

Rie was visibly taken aback.

"Ah, ah, no! Locke told me it was an appropriate gift! He said it's a popular gift in the Empire!!"

Rie abruptly stopped talking, her eyes widened as she came to a realization.

"That jerk Locke tricked me."

Saying that, she shot me a look.

Her expression was a mix of dismay and surprise, her lips sealed in tight determination.

"It's not like that. I genuinely didn't know."

I couldn't help but chuckle.

"What did you even do at the Royal Palace?"

It's only fair, right?

Give and take, that's how the world works.

Rie glared at me, her cheeks puffed out in anger.

Meanwhile, Astina shifted her attention from a fuming Rie to me.

"Rudy Astria, I couldn't prepare a separate gift."

"Ah, that's fine. I didn't even know it was my birthday."

Astina had reserved this restaurant, which was a gift in itself.

"Instead, I'd like to discuss something else."

"Oh? What is it?"

"It's about the incident with my older brother."

I frowned at the mention of it.

"Was there a problem?"

Astina smiled reassuringly.

"No, not at all. He is facing severe punishment. In fact, my father is pushing for an even harsher sentence."

I felt a wave of relief.

"That's good to hear."

Astina continued, "However, that's not why I brought it up. My father wanted to apologize and thank you. He was quite worried about you getting hurt."

"I wasn't injured because of them, tell him not to worry."

I was unharmed, so there was no reason for Astina's father to feel guilty.

And after all, it wasn't the parents who were at fault, it was Harpel himself.

Considering Astina's usual behavior and her parents' reaction now, they seemed to be decent parents.

Harpel was the anomaly.

Astina, hearing Rudy's words, smiled and proposed an idea.

"Why not convey this message yourself when you visit our territory?"

"Me…?"

"My father is keen on meeting you as well. You've piqued his interest."

I contemplated the proposal for a moment.

I had planned to spend the holidays training at the academy, but perhaps a short visit wouldn't hurt.

Besides, training non-stop would drive me mad.

"Sure, I'll visit during the holiday."

Rie suddenly jumped in.

"When? When will you go?"

“…Why do you want to know?"

Rie looked sullen at my response.

Astina chuckled at the sight.

"Just let us know when you plan on coming."

"Yes, I'll let you know a week prior."

With that, we finished our meal and headed back to the dormitory.

CHAPTER 48
FINAL EXAM (6)

The chirping of birds echoed in the early morning air.

The recent days had been hot, but a cool breeze prevailed during the mornings.

Yeniel was warming up in the sports field.

A sigh escaped her as she prepared for her daily workout routine.

Her day started at dawn.

A ritual from her time as an assassin involving stretches and meditation to condition her body and mind. Over the years, this routine had become second nature.

Skipping it would make her feel sluggish all day.

So she continued her exercises, then took a shower.

* * *

Fresh and rejuvenated, she headed towards the classroom.

On the way, she noticed teaching assistants updating a board.

They were posting rankings—likely the newly announced grades.

Though grades weren't her priority, Yeniel was curious about her rank, since Evan had been teaching her.

She moved closer to examine the rankings:

Evan

Of course, Evan held the top spot. It was predictable, given his diligent studying

habits. Her gaze scanned the rest of the list.

Rudy Astria

Yeniel

Rie Von Ristonia

…

"……?"

Puzzled, Yeniel scrutinized the grades. She blinked and double-checked the bulletin board. It remained unchanged.

"Oh! Isn't this Yeniel, the pride of our Swordsmanship Department!"

A burly professor from the Swordsmanship Department strode towards her, his booming laughter resonating in the corridor.

His massive muscles were a testament to his hard work.

"Hello."

Politely, Yeniel greeted him and gestured towards the board.

"It seems…… the grades are a bit strange……"

"Heh heh heh! Modesty, eh? Fitting for the pride of the Swordsmanship Department!"

Bewildered, Yeniel looked at the professor.

"With your top score in swordsmanship and you aced the general knowledge exam, that rank is no surprise! You even surpassed that so-called wise princess! Truly, you're our department's pride. Ha ha ha!"

The professor chortled, walking away after adding, "Can't wait to see Cromwell's face!"

"……???"

* * *

Meanwhile, in his office, Professor Cromwell was staring at the grade report, sighing.

"Haaah… These kids…"

Professor Cromwell stared at the grade sheet spread across his desk.

The top students' scores had taken a serious hit.

It wasn't a matter of one or two students; the average score had dipped significantly.

While Evan's performance was stable, both Rudy and Rie's grades had plummeted.

"This is a disgrace to the Magic Department……"

The Magic Department was traditionally at the top of the academy's academic leaderboard.

Not so much a tradition as an inevitable fact.

Excelling in the Swordsmanship Department or other fields required physical training.

Students who opted for the Swordsmanship Department came not to study, but to train.

Naturally, they didn't have as much time to hit the books.

But Yeniel was an exception.

As a former assassin, she was already proficient in swordsmanship and martial arts.

All she needed was to polish those skills and develop her sword aura.

High grades in swordsmanship, combined with ample study time, resulted in her stellar performance.

Unaware of this, Professor Cromwell was left puzzled.

"But this student…"

Cromwell glanced at the lower part of the report card.

Luna Railer

"Why has her score fallen so much?"

* * *

"Haah……"

Luna walked aimlessly, yawning.

Upset over the previous day's exam, she had cheered up after a delightful dinner with Rudy.

She figured everyone found the test tough, Rudy and Rie included.

"It can't be that bad, right?"

Just as Luna thought that, her spirits took a nosedive.

"No, this can't be."

From a mid-term rank of fifth, she had plummeted to thirty-fifth.

"What… what should I do?"

Despair washed over Luna, but she soon started to rationalize.

"Does… does it really matter, these grades?"

She nodded, trying to convince herself.

"Exactly! These numbers don't mean anything!"

"What do you mean they don't mean anything?"

The voice startled Luna.

"Pr… Professor Cromwell?"

Behind her stood Cromwell, arms folded, staring at her.

"Come with me, Luna Railer."

"Eek."

Luna trailed after Cromwell, a gloomy expression on her face.

They headed to Cromwell's office, where Rudy and Rie were already seated, heads bowed.

"You've really messed this up."

Cromwell showed them their grades, all lower than the previous exam.

"Considering that Rudy Astria was hospitalized, that's understandable. But what about you two? Why the drop?"

"I'm sorry……”

Luna mumbled, head still bowed.

Rie, on the other hand, spoke with conviction.

"The exam this time was tough. Isn't that why everyone's scores dipped?"

Her tone was confident but respectful.

Professor Cromwell responded by presenting them with the top students' scores.

"Take a look."

Evan's grades remained unchanged—perfect scores on both midterms and final exams.

The same held true for other top performers.

"Lower-ranking students did see their scores drop, but the top-ranking students' performance held steady. You three are the exception."

"Eh……”

"Huh……”

Rie and Luna were taken aback by their scores.

Comparing their own scores to the rest, they realized how much they had slipped.

"Yes, as Rie and Rudy's scores were already high, a slight drop didn't affect their ranks much."

Having said this, Professor Cromwell turned to Luna.

"Luna Railer."

"Yes…?"

"What are your plans for the holidays?"

Luna fiddled with her fingers, her eyes darting.

"I, I intended to go back home…”

"So, you're free."

Next, Professor Cromwell offered Luna a sheet of paper.

"It's an invitation to a special lecture by Professor McGuire over the break."

Luna accepted the paper, scanning its contents.

The lecture focused on magical circle theory, a topic Cromwell knew Luna was keen on.

"Attending this lecture could help cut down your regular study time."

While Luna found the lecture appealing, there was one glaring issue.

"I… I don't think I can attend…”

The issue was the cost.

The lecture fee, written at the bottom of the paper, was beyond Luna's means.

She had some funds from Rudy for research, but she couldn't use them for a special lecture.

Asking Rudy would probably result in him happily footing the bill, but she was uncomfortable with that.

She was already relying on him for tuition, living expenses, and research funds.

She couldn't ask for more.

Cromwell glanced between Rie and Rudy.

"You two may leave."

“…Understood."

Rudy and Rie, concern etched on their faces, glanced at Luna before exiting.

Watching them leave, Cromwell leaned back in his chair.

"I will cover the lecture's cost."

“…What?"

Luna's eyes widened at Professor Cromwell's words.

"I can manage that. Learn from Professor McGuire, improve your grades."

"But… Professor, you don't have to…”

"On the contrary, Luna. I do."

Professor Cromwell declared, gritting his teeth, fists clenched.

"I can't bear those swordsmanship department brutes belittling my magic department any longer…!"

“…Huh?"

Luna's head tilted in confusion as Cromwell veered off-topic.

Cromwell rose from his seat, his grip firm on Luna's shoulders as he locked eyes with her.

"Luna, study hard, and show Yeniel or whoever she is your strength. Don't let those muscle-brained guys stand tall."

His gaze held an intense fervor that made Luna chuckle awkwardly.

It was strangely heartening to see the usually grouchy Cromwell so fired up.

"Ahahaha……”

"Then I'll assume there are no objections. I'll arrange the special lectures with Professor Mcguire."

"Ah…… Thank you!"

Bowing deeply, Luna offered her sincere gratitude. Cromwell responded with a warm smile.

As Luna exited his office, Cromwell returned his attention to her exam paper.

Luna's answers in the magic theory section were all correct—she even correctly answered some questions that both Princess Rie and Rudy Astria had missed.

Only Evan and Luna had correctly answered these particular questions.

"Rie will figure it out."

Rie, ever prideful, would use this setback as a lesson to drive her own improvement, but Luna was a different story.

Her scores had dropped since the previous test, and Cromwell suspected she would

rationalize her performance.

She might have convinced herself that her recent score reflected her actual ability and that her midterm success was merely luck.

"Why did her scores drop?"

Cromwell furrowed his brow.

He couldn't imagine that her grades had dropped because she was busy preparing for Rudy's birthday.

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